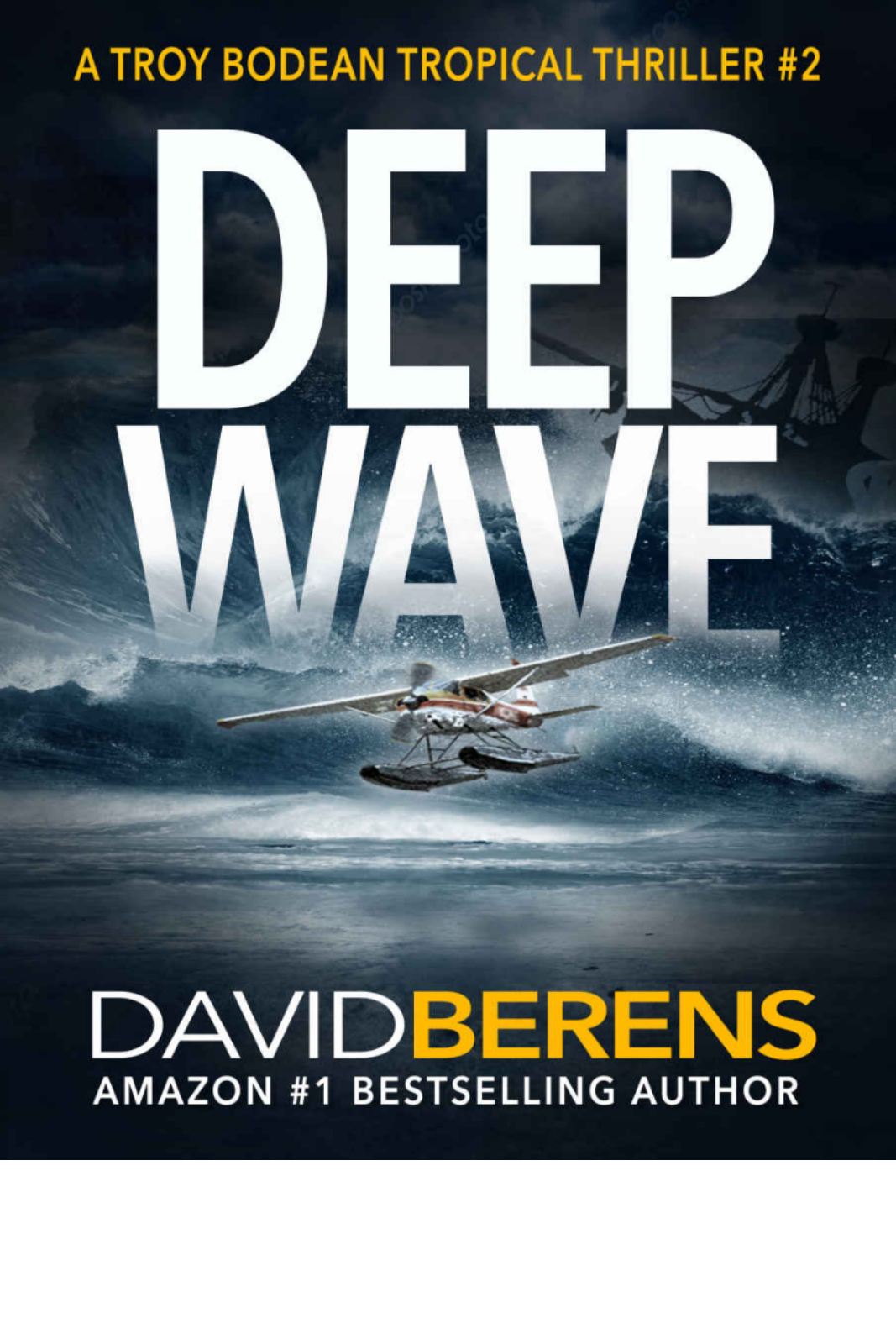


A TROY BODEAN TROPICAL THRILLER #2

DEEP WAVE

The background of the cover is a dramatic, high-contrast photograph of a tropical storm. In the foreground, a small, white and red seaplane with floats is flying low over the water, leaving a white wake. The ocean is dark and turbulent, with large, white-capped waves crashing. In the background, the dark silhouette of a large sailing ship is visible against the stormy sky. The overall mood is one of intense action and danger.

DAVID **BERENS**

AMAZON #1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Deep Wave

A Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #2

David Berens



Contents

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Prologue

Part I

1.
The Ride
2.
Treasure Daydreams
3.
Señora De La Muerta
4.
Sloppy Joe's
5.
Lucky Cat
6.
Irish Kevin's
7.
Object Fear
8.
Wyatt 1
9.
Report
10.
We Need A Better Boat
11.
Sunset Pier
12.
Black Depth
13.
Fanning Detritus
14.
Stingray
15.
Location, Location, Location
16.
A Living Thing
17.
A Man About A Crane
18.
X Marks The Spot
19.
Buried Deep
20.
Cut The Rope

Part II

21.
Rough Riders
- 22.

Ahab's Cellphone
23.
Cover That Up
24.
A Blaze Of Glory
25.
This Too Shall Pass
26.
Can You Hear Me Now?
27.
Shot Through The Heart
28.
Dreams Of You
29.
Nice Nap
30.
Needles And Pins
31.
Troika Huge
32.
An Odd Bowl
33.
Don't Lose Your Head
34.
Ocean Blue

Part III

35.
Between The Bars
36.
Droning On And On
37.
You're Going The Wrong Way
38.
Overheard
39.
Santa Maria
40.
Smoke Signals
41.
Motion Sickness
42.
History
43.
Flaring Up
44.
Light My Fire

Epilogue

Blood Wave

Prologue

1.
Life's A Beach
2.
Ain't Missin' You
3.
Canal Point

Afterword

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A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D.F. Berens'.

For more information, visit davidfberens.com

*For you, Dad.
My love of reading came from you.*

Prologue

G.P.S.

Hector Martinez crept onto the boat in total, blackout darkness, thinking the two passengers had passed out from a long day of fishing and drinking. His intention had been to quietly steal their G.P.S. unit and be gone with it before they woke. He was unscrewing it from their boat's dashboard when a young kid, maybe college-aged, appeared from down below holding a plate with a sandwich and a beer. In one startled second, Hector grabbed him and tried to pin him down. The kid was quick and strong, shoving him backward, almost off the boat and yelling out to someone presumably still below deck. Another kid, maybe a year or two younger, jumped up the stairs two at a time as Hector regained his feet.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"I have no beef with you," Hector said breathing heavily, "but I need your G.P.S."

"Dude," the older kid stepped toward him, "you need to get the hell off our boat."

"Not without that," he said, and pointed toward the dashboard.

As he turned to look, Hector drew his knife and slashed him harshly in the throat. Blood spurted high into the air, so much of it that it was obvious his jugular had been cut.

"Holy shit!" the younger boy screamed and lunged toward him.

Within seconds, Hector had killed them both. It was that simple. He hadn't meant for it to go down that way, but he really didn't care either. He wiped off his knife and finished the job of unscrewing the G.P.S. Sitting on the dashboard next to the navigation unit was a blackened metal bowl that the boys had clearly brought up from below. It wobbled around unsteadily because of a weird ring on the bottom. He'd been instructed to get rid of anything they'd brought up, so he hefted it into the water. It disappeared with a *plunk* into the black surface. He jumped back aboard his boat having turned on the trolling motor of the boys' rented boat and steering it to the west... away from the Keys.

JULIE MATTHEWS, Channel 7 news anchorwoman, had plenty to say about Hurricane Daniel; wind rotation, water temperature, velocity, but the man watching the report was only interested in one thing; the storm's direction.

It looked as if it was going to track northward toward Cuba then head a few miles south of Key West, close enough to do some serious damage... probably just after next Wednesday. If the storm kept up its current category four strength, it would certainly scatter and bury the evidence.

The man muted the droning weather report and clicked open one of his three secured cellphones.

"It looks like we have an answer to our problems," he said to a voicemail that always picked up with no courtesy message. He closed the cellphone and waited.

Exactly two minutes later his landline rang. He picked up the receiver and listened.

"Yes, Papa," he answered the caller, "I have someone on it." Then he hung up the phone.

Too many loose ends, he thought. He believed he'd had them all tied up when his last Cuban friend had shot down the drone, plunging it into the gulf. And then those damn boys started bragging about finding something out there. That loose end was being tied up tonight.

Far too many people getting far too close to the wreck. He ticked off a mental checklist and when he was satisfied he'd taken care of everything, he clicked the remote and turned the volume back up on the television.

The weather girl was now warning the residents of southern Florida that there was a possibility of a non-local evacuation as early as Friday, and given the storm's intensity and potential track, there would likely be a total evacuation by Monday.

The man turned off the television when the current weather report became predictable, going on and on and calling for rain, rain and more rain. He re-lit a cold cigar and pulled a few strong puffs. He stood up and strode over to his desk, picked up a long rolled up piece of paper, and carefully unfurled it until a map of the Gulf of Mexico lay in front of him. He moved his stapler onto one corner and his ashtray to the other to hold the map open, then drew a line roughly representing the path of Hurricane Daniel.

"Anywhere within a hundred miles of that oughta do the trick," he said through a puff of cigar.

He traced the line up toward Key West and drew an X about sixty miles southwest of the island. He tapped it with his pen a couple of

times.

“Do your worst, Daniel,” he said, clicking off the desk lamp and throwing the room into blackness.

Part I



Something In The Water

“If your ship doesn’t come in, swim out to meet it.”

-Jonathan Winters

“We call them tropical depressions and give them mundane names like Hugo or Andrew in an effort to rein in their power and rob them of their fury, but to date no man on any sailing ship has ever tamed a hurricane.”

-David F. Berens

The Ride

Troy Clint Bodean woke up with his cheek stuck to the dark aged wood of Captain Tony's Bar. It was a hot tourist spot, but still a crusty holdover from old Key West. On any given night, one might find a sexy sorority kitten sitting next to Barnacle Bill. With its open-air front, dirty floors, never-level coin operated pool tables and mid-forty-something rockers desperately holding on to their stringy manes of bleach blonde hair on stage, it painted a portrait of a must-see location... but once is usually enough. Troy's fingers were still wrapped around a shot glass full of sticky brown liquor. His Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat was propped backward sitting on the crown of his head.

"Oh God," he muttered and tried to lift his head.

Twelve months in. He'd suffered through twelve long, slow, hard months in this dang place. God, Pawleys Island had been crazy and he'd wanted to slow down, but this was ridiculous. He'd been dulling the boredom with more drink than usual lately; shots of this and shots of that had become a bad habit... a habit he needed badly to kick.

Hangovers must be extremely heavy, he thought, because once they got into your skull; it seemed immensely difficult to lift his head. But with great effort he finally sat up on the barstool, peeled open his eyes, and searched the room. Two other people were sitting at the bar across and diagonally from him.

Noticing him stir, one of them got up and strode over to him with a damp bar towel. A just beyond middle-aged Italian man Troy knew as Vince the bartender took the shot glass of liquor and poured it into the bar sink.

"Hey," he protested weakly, "I wasn't done with that."

"Okay, Troy," he said to the groggy patron, "you don't gotta go home, but ya can't stay here."

"Right, right," Troy rubbed his eyes and ran his hand through his matted hair, "what time is it, Vince?"

This was not the original owner of Captain Tony's, but a newly

retired fishing expedition guide out of Islamorada who took a job as a bartender in Key West for extra cash. Before that he'd been in Chicago and no one really knew what he did for work there, and no one really cared to know.

He had jet-black hair with streaks of grey over each ear slicked back roughly from a deeply tanned and lined forehead. A stray scar from what looked like skin cancer surgery broke up his receding hairline. His hands were meaty and rough and sported rings on the left and right little fingers. Vince looked at his Tag Heuer watch.

"It's four-thirty in the mornin', Dude" he said.

Troy shook his head and slowly wobbled himself up off the barstool. He took a step toward the front door, swayed hard back toward the bar barely catching himself before crashing into a mixed drink blending machine.

"I got it, I got it," he held up his hands waving off the nearly diving bartender trying to avert a drunken mess on his bar.

He stumbled again, this time catching himself on a floor-to-ceiling column that was covered in vacationers' business cards, pictures and even a couple of bras. That must've been a fun night he thought to himself. He looked at the myriad of cards and focused his eyes on a particularly bright looking card. It was a picture of a purple to orange sunset over ocean waves. The text simply said Megan Simons, Ocean Biology and Marine Historian. It said something about the love of ocean legend and blah blah blah... phone number. Good.

He looked over his shoulder to see if Vince was looking and plucked the card from the column. He shuffled out of the bar and made his way to Duval Street.

At this muggy but cool time of early morning, the crowded street was home to stoners, bohemians, flamboyant homosexuals and transsexuals, people who didn't fit the mainstream life at the north end of US 1. He was not surprised to find it bustling with South Florida socialite kids as well, stumbling about paying way too much for beer. It seemed that everyone here was running from something, and they simply ran out of road.

In the eighteenth century it was pirates, the nineteenth century brought soldiers and the twentieth century introduced smugglers. Any of those would be better than the cracked-out, Miami weekenders that flooded into Key West every Friday night.

He hiked over to where he thought he'd parked his scooter. Not there. He looked around unsteadily for a minute and still saw no sign of his ride.

"Mmmkay," he muttered, "guess I'll take the bus."

Buses, bikes and scooters are the major modes of transportation for locals in Key West. Taxis are for vacationers with lots of money to

burn on such things. He walked to the nearest bus stop and plopped down on the bench. He was out as soon as he hit.

"Yo," a rising voice woke him from a dream about a man, a boat and a fish, "you need a ride, sugar?"

Out of the fog in his head and the fog of the morning, he could see a bus driver, a black woman he'd ridden with many times. She probably outweighed Troy by one hundred and fifty pounds and her arms jiggled underneath from her elbow to her shoulder. She had corn-rowed hair pulled back from her smooth forehead down to her shoulders and a white and pink floral bandana tied on top of her head. The sundress she wore, if you could call it that, was draped over her body in pale yellow with a swirling orange pattern of vines, flowers, moons and stars.

Glowing chestnut eyes smiled at him from a face that was round and smooth. She looked soft and comfortable and safe, like the beloved nanny of some rich, white southern Georgia family. On his frequent rides with her he'd learned that she was new to Key West displaced from New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, a Cajun chef from a well-known gumbo café. She had promised him many times to make him a Louisiana meal he would never forget. He could barely remember his time back in Louisiana on the boats... another lifetime.

"Keys ain't gonna git hit by no hurricane," she once told him, "they been blessed by the nuns."

It was an old legend; he knew it well. So far, it had held true.

"Yup," Troy nearly growled with his throat now cottony dry, "a ride would be good."

"Where you headed, baby?" she closed the door behind him as he slumped down in the first seat.

"This route go anywhere near Pepe's?" he asked.

"You bet it does," she pulled into motion, "right by the front door. Lookin' for some poke chop covered steak to ease dat pain?"

"I was actually thinking about a Yuengling, but yeah, that sounds good too," he laughed.

"Baby, stick with dem poke chops," she scolded him, "ain't nothin' but the devil in dat alcohol."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Troy laughed.

The winding bus route let people on and off as they moved away from the tourist district of Duval Street. He easily drifted into sleep again. She woke him as she opened the bus door. They had arrived at Pepe's. He took the first step down the stairs to exit the bus and she grabbed the sleeve of his shirt.

"Great things gonna come your way, sugar," she said but her eyes darkened, "but jus' remember dat deep is a dangerous place. You take care of yasef, Troy."

“Don’t you worry about me,” he said with a grin and ran his fingers through his hair, “I’ve got a knack for staying out of trouble.”

“Now you know I don’t believe dat,” the black woman threw back her head and laughed.

She closed the door and hissed off the brakes into the slowly creeping dawn. Troy laughed to himself as he walked into Pepe’s. His head was finally clearing.

Treasure Daydreams

Shoving a plate of mostly finished world-famous Pepe's pork chops away from him and sipping down the last of a Yuengling beer, Troy Bodean pulled the business card out of his shirt pocket.

"Well, Megan," he flipped open his cellphone, "let's see if you're interested."

He dialed the number on the card and waited. Two rings, three... then a voicemail.

"Hi this is Meg. Can't get to the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and number and a short message, I'll call you back," it said followed by the obligatory beep.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. Oops, it was only five-thirty in the morning. He closed the phone without leaving a message... try back later. He got up to leave and the waitress stopped him.

"Cash or charge," she asked him sarcastically.

He looked over her shoulder and found the manager shaking his head.

"Put it on my tab, sweetie," he winked at the girl.

"So much for my tip, eh?" she rolled her eyes.

He turned and walked toward the door.

As he opened it to the newly coming dawn he looked back at her and said, "Hey when this next one comes through, I'll leave you a tip like you've never seen before."

He smiled and walked out as the girl shook her head at his back. This scene played out every time Troy came into Pepe's and every time he left without paying.

A dreary mile later, he unlocked and opened the door to his houseboat. Calling it a houseboat is a stretch of the term; basically, he lived in a trailer on the water. Parked at the dock was his Honda scooter with a chain through the wheel.

"Oh," he nodded to the scooter, "that's where I left you."

After coming to Key West, he'd realized that his truck was a bit of overkill... nobody local drove a car and very few rode anything but a

bicycle. He opted for something in between, a bright red Honda Elite with a small basket on the back.

As the sun rose over the ocean creating yet another spectacular Key West sunrise, he shrugged off his sandals and slumped down on his bed. With his belly full and gentle surf rocking the houseboat slightly, he slipped into unconsciousness.

The blaring chirp of his cellphone jerked him out of his dreams of finding that one chest of gold buried in the deep.

“Troy, where the hell are you?!” the voice at the other end of the line demanded.

“Huh, what?” he struggled to shake off the grogginess.

“Your nine o’clock is here,” the voice was an exasperated whisper.

He glanced over at his alarm clock. Nine forty-five. Ouch.

“I’m on my way, R.B.” he clicked his phone shut and sat up on the edge of the bed.

R.B. was Ryan Bodean, Troy’s younger brother. He’d been estranged from him after returning from Afghanistan, but in an odd turn of events, his brother had bought a seaplane expedition company in the Keys and was suddenly in need of a pilot. Although a seaplane was a different animal from the Apaches he used to fly, he made a pretty quick transition.

He groaned as he lifted himself and stood wobbling slightly. He walked to the tiny bathroom and turned on the cold water in the sink. He splashed the water on his face and tried to rub some of the hangover out of his eyes. He noticed that his scruffy chin had sprouted a few gray hairs and his wrinkles seemed to be a little deeper. He splashed a little water on his hair and brushed it back with his fingers, a few gray hairs had popped up here lately as well. He thought about showering and shaving, but decided to leave that until later, after this first trip to the fort. A hot steaming shower and shave, he promised himself.

He threw on a new white shirt with the company logo on the chest, *Tortuga Adventures*, shoved his now infamous Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat on his head, grabbed his grey New Balance tennis shoes and slammed the houseboat door behind him. He fumbled through his keys, locked his door while trying to slip on his shoes. The scooter took two attempts but finally sputtered to life. He nearly poked his eye trying to navigate out of his drive and put on his Aviators.

Minutes later, as he pulled into the parking lot, he could see that the seaplane’s engine had been fired up for him. He chained the scooter’s wheel and rushed into the sales booth.

“Bro, what the heck??” R.B. demanded of him, “No, you know what, I don’t want to know.”

Troy smiled at him and slapped him on the shoulder. R.B. had come back from the war with a boatload of G.I. Bill money. He got his History degree and a teaching certificate... all the while thinking Troy hadn't made it back. Troy was lost in a Vegas strip club called the Peppermint Hippo spinning records for the lovely ladies who danced there. Seems the ghastly details of the bomb that had killed Harry Nedman had grown to include Troy's demise as well.

R.B. was barely removed from graduating and had spent the years since teaching geography, even though his major was in history. That was public schooling for you. He had confided with Troy that the end had come when one of his students had answered a final exam question as follows:

On what continent is the Nile River? Tennessee

Well, at least they'd spelled Tennessee right. He failed the kid, packed up his desk and never looked back. Lucky for him, he'd been run through the pilot program in Afghanistan and could fly everything but a jet. Upon leaving his cushy thirteen thousand a year teaching job, he'd found a floundering seaplane ferry business down in the islands and had made the owner an offer he couldn't refuse. The money had come in the form of a *loan* from their grandmother, Charlotte Lucille Bodean along with what little was left from his G.I. Bill. He'd paid everything back within a year. He joked with Troy that he'd gotten his inheritance too, as everyone thought he'd been killed.

R.B. was a good-looking kid with long combed down hair that had golden streaks in it from his time in Key West and a clean-cut goatee, the current cut was just covering his chin. He was built like a baseball player with strong limbs and broad shoulders, but his waist was beginning to show the effect of his love for beer. He and Troy were famous around Key West bars. It was widely thought that R.B. was the most eligible and sought after straight man on the island.

"Did you give 'em the emergency Fort Jefferson speech?" Troy winked.

"And then some," R.B. laughed, "You know, *management* won't be too happy about this."

"You fueled her up?" he asked as he grabbed his khaki cap and walked out the door.

"Does the Pope wear a funny hat?" R.B. got up and followed him out.

"That he does, that he does," Troy gave him a mock salute as he climbed into the plane.

"Good flight," R.B. called to him.

"You bet," he nodded and disappeared behind the closing hatch.

As he lifted the Cessna 208 into the air, he began his own speech about the tropical wildlife and sea creatures he and his passengers

would see as they traveled to the famed nineteenth century island sixty miles off Key West.

As the plane neared the island, he could hear the oohs and ahs of his passengers.

Troy began what he referred to as his *landing speech*, "Ponce de Leon called it the turtle island or *Las Tortugas* long before the fort was ever built and pirates used it as a base for attacking merchant shipping in the sixteenth century. The national park is actually a collection of seven tiny islands surrounded by white beaches, teeming coral reefs and legends of sunken treasure ships, but the stars of Garden Key are the forty-five-foot high casemate style walls that rise up out of the sand."

With this he took a turn around the island to give his passengers a complete view of the fort's hexagonal shaped walls that surrounded nearly the entire island; however, Troy couldn't keep his eyes from drifting out to the open sea beyond it. She was out there; he knew where she was hiding. Finding the right time to go and get her and someone to help him salvage her was the real trick.

He knew he couldn't trust any local divers with this, hell they might get him out to the site and throw him into the water for some hungry shark to find, sixty miles was a long way to swim. This girl from the business card, Megan, would be perfect, a little green, controllable and highly unlikely to mutiny once they found the wreck. He glanced to the south and could barely see the darkening hurricane sky, he'd have to move fast if he was going to get anything up.

With the rush of splash down and the exciting ride up onto the white sand beach, Troy received the obligatory applause from the delighted passengers and as they left the plane they tipped him a few dollars for his expertise. He quickly folded the bills into his pocket and helped them step onto the sand. *A lot like back in the Army choppering old General Summerton around*, he thought to himself as he climbed back up to the cockpit, *but without the tips*.

The vacationers would be ushered through the fort and served a beachside lunch over the course of about two hours, just enough time for a nap. He leaned back into one of the more comfortable passenger seats and tipped his cowboy hat forward over his eyes.

"Sleeping on the job again, huh?"

Troy opened his eyes to see a face he hadn't seen in years, Natasha Wainwright, wearing the unmistakable uniform of the United States Park Service, without the hat. Her military posture was hard and straight, and her physique was like that of a triathlon athlete – mainly because she had trained for and competed in at least twenty of them. She had yellow blonde hair pulled back so tight in a ponytail it looked as if it was pulling her razor thin eyebrows upward, not one hair out

of place. Troy could feel her pale hazel eyes probing him and found disapproval in her tightly pursed lips. She wore no makeup, but he thought he could see the slightest film of sunscreen on her sharp nose.

They had met fifteen years ago – before the Iraq War– in Little Creek, Virginia where her father's Seal team was based. Troy had been stationed there prior to shipping out to Afghanistan for some training on water rescue. *That's the Army for you*, he thought, *water rescue in the desert*. He had seen her running before dawn each morning, finally asking her out one Friday night at the officer's club. She turned him down three times before giving in to him. She'd had a hard and brusque demeanor and at that time, he'd thought he was into that. That was another lifetime ago, before the war, before Vegas, before Louisiana and before Pawleys Island... way back in his Army days. Nowadays he was laid back and easy going and liked his company that way too.

"Natasha?"

What in the hell was she doing here. He'd been out here hundreds of times and knew all the park rangers by name and had never caught wind of this.

"The one and only; I walked out to see the plane, but immediately recognized your day-old beard and trademark slouch."

He laughed; she hadn't changed a bit, a lifetime military brat that didn't apologize for anything... brash in every sense of the word. She had gone through her military career using her father's high-ranking connections to get her into the Pentagon. Ambition was her middle name.

After they had gone out for a while, he'd realized they were yin and yang, two very opposite sides of the same coin. She was honest, disciplined and loyal. Right and wrong were not debatable. Troy admired those traits, but he had a more *fluid* definition of right and wrong. She also didn't approve of how he spent his free time with buddies drinking and talking about flying and other women. It became apparent they wouldn't last, since they drove each other crazy. Luckily though, the military had done the breaking up for them, his training was over and her new assignment – very confidential – was somewhere else... she couldn't tell him where. How the hell did she end up as a park ranger on a tiny island in the middle of nowhere?

"You're a Park Ranger?"

"Yep. I decided D.C. and the military was not for me. I wanted to enjoy nature, not order people to blow it up. This seemed like a nice place to get away, seventy-five miles from the mainland."

He knew her well enough to know she was lying; brutally honest people make horrible liars. Besides, her ambitions wouldn't let her pass up opportunities in Washington just to kill time in a place like

this. Not only that, Fort Jefferson was sixty miles from the mainland, not seventy-five. A Park Ranger would know that. *Why was she here?*

"So, you've put your flying to use, I see." She was being sarcastic. To her, if an airplane didn't have sidewinder missiles attached, it wasn't worth flying.

"That I have, darlin'. I answered a classified ad with *Tortuga Adventures* for a pilot," he lied, "It's amazing what you can learn to do watchin' YouTube videos."

He was suddenly flirting, but he wasn't sure why. She wasn't buying it anyway.

"I like it here, suits me," he said, in a last-ditch attempt to justify his slouchy island existence to someone who would never be impressed by it.

There was a long awkward silence.

"Okay, well, I have to go tend to the tourists, but we should catch up," she said, to avoid continuing down a dead-end conversation.

"Is this a regular trip for you?" she asked.

"Every day there ain't a hurricane."

"Great! I have some things I want to ask you about the area, and there are some places nearby I'd like to see from the air. Think I can hitch a ride?"

He could see some wheels turning behind her eyes, wheels that had a strangely secretive air to them, but he couldn't say no. Despite having been trained to kill people and all that straight-shooting brashness, she was still cute enough to get whatever she wanted. *What was she up to?*

"Sure, just say when, darlin'."

"Will do. See you around, and Troy" she said, "don't call me darlin'."

He tipped his hat, "Roger that."

She turned to go. He couldn't help but notice that she was just as fit as ever... even from behind.

As she walked away, another lumbering figure walked toward Troy. It was a figure he knew well. This park ranger had on the same uniform, but it was a bit wrinkled, buttons straining to cover a bulging belly. Thick plastic framed glasses bent outward over his temples, one of the lenses cracked in the top left corner, both lenses scratched in various places. One corner of his shirt's front had come loose and was almost dangling free over his belt.

James Howard was the perfect park ranger for this place. He was the bohemian dropout type who was lucky enough to have a paying job with federal benefits. This fort was his little kingdom, where he ruled with a drunken fist.

"You two seem to have hit it off." He said.

"Long story, man. We have a history... an ancient history. What the hell is she doing here?"

"She's been here for almost a year. I got a call one day from top brass in D.C. to tell me we were adding a Ranger. I wasn't aware that we needed one, nor did I ask for one. She's not too sociable, though. She stays in her room with a laptop and satellite phone she brought with her. You're the first person I've seen her say more than three words to; other than that, she seems hardworking, honest and loyal. So, I hate her already."

"She's a bit tight, but I guess she's pretty smart."

"Yeah, but she doesn't know dink about being a Ranger, even though her paperwork says she has been one for six years."

"Six years, you say? That's very interesting." Troy watched carefully as she marched off into the distance, seemingly oblivious to her immediate surroundings.

"Oh yeah, got something for you," Troy reached behind his seat and pulled a brown paper bag out.

James pulled the paper back slightly to reveal the label on the bottle.

"Patron, eh?" he nodded approvingly, "What are we celebrating?"

"I'll tell ya later."

James broke into a grin, "Ahhhh, keeping secrets, are we?"

"Nothing like that," Troy laughed and shook his head, "I just have a good feeling about my not too distant future."

"Consider me intrigued," James tucked the bottle back into the bag, "I look forward to our toasting your new good fortune soon."

"You bet," he clapped the big man on the shoulder.

"Ah well, I'll let you catch some shut eye, dude," James gave him a thumbs-up and turned toward the fort, "besides, I have to start this damn tour soon."

"Good man."

Troy settled back into his seat and drifted into a warm sleep, he had at least an hour before his passengers would be back.

He was just seeing visions of a sunken treasure ship when he was pulled back from sleep yet again today by the horrendous sound of his cellphone.

"Dangit, what's a guy gotta do to get some sleep around here??? Gotta figure out how to change that ringtone," he muttered to himself as he flipped it open, "Yep, this is Troy, go ahead."

"Troy who?" a girl's voice asked.

"Troy Bodean," he sat up quick, "and who might this be."

"You called my phone at five-thirty this morning."

"Yes," he said quickly, "Yes, I did."

Señora De La Muerta

Megan Simons wanted desperately to be a granola munching, tree-hugging, environmentalist hippie chick, but her father had planted too many God-fearing conservative seeds in her throughout her life for her to truly feel that way. The best she could manage was a *Save the Manatee* sticker on the left side of her Honda civic bumper and a *Vote for W* on the right.

She had grown up in Boston and was now secretly glad her father had sent her to a strict private Catholic school. Actually 'learning' in a place like that was demanded of the students, not requested. That, and also she liked washing her hair on more than a monthly basis.

Somewhere along the way she had picked up an interest in the sea, which led her to school in south Florida. An internship had landed her a job at the Dolphin Research Center on Grassy Key, about half way down the long stretch of islands.

While she'd been feeding the resident sea life this morning she couldn't help but notice that most of the center's animals were restless. It had to be the impending storm.

When she got back to her office, she sat down and dialed the unknown number that had called her at five-thirty that morning. It had the local area code three zero five, but it wasn't familiar. The research center got calls from all over the country, so she wasn't too suspicious about it. The caller introduced himself as Troy Bodean. She didn't know the name.

"Well, Mister Bodean," she asked, "what can I do for you?"

There was only silence the other end of the line, and she almost hung up... another crazy man in the Keys.

"Your card," he finally started, sounding unsure of himself, "it says Love of Ocean Legend."

Megan rolled her eyes. She'd had those cards printed when she was just out of grad school. The idealist in her had chosen a colorful sunset background with bright white cursive text; now her card was just white with black text, Arial font.

“Okay?” She was willing to follow this for one more line from the guy. “So—”

“So what do you know about shipwrecks?” he blurted suddenly, sensing her drifting away from the conversation.

“Well, not much,” she replied. “I’ve toured a couple, but that’s about it.”

“You’re a diver?”

“Of course.”

The man paused again. “Look,” he finally said, “could we talk about this in person?”

“Talk about what?” she demanded. “I don’t even know what we’re talking about. Listen, I don’t know you and this is all very strange. Thanks for your call, and good luck.”

With that she hung up without waiting for his reply.



TROY LOOKED DOWN at his phone. He pushed the button to redial her number, but his passengers were suddenly poking their heads into the door of the seaplane.

“Ah, there you are,” he boomed in his best smarmy game-show-host voice. “How was lunch?”

The vacationers all chimed in with beaming faces about how amazing the fort was and the beach was this and the water was and... blah blah blah. He’d heard all this a thousand times, but he smiled and nodded like it was the first time he’d ever been to the fort.

The plane lifted off in a rush from the water and headed back to Key West.



MEGAN SIMONS SAT at her desk and stared at the phone.

“Hey, you okay?” said her assistant, who’d stuck her head into her office.

“Hmm?” Megan shook off the daze. “Oh yeah, I’m fine. Chelsea, will you call the Weather Bureau and see what the status of evacuation is currently?”

“You don’t think this thing’s gonna be big, do ya?” the girl asked.

“Nah,” she assured her, “but there’s no harm in being careful.”

Chelsea nodded. There wasn’t much on her plate today, so she decided to get out of the office for a while.

“I think I’m going to go for a run.” Megan stood up from her desk. “Can you take care of the late feeding schedule?”

“I sure can,” Chelsea said, and disappeared from the doorway.

Megan opened the locker door next to her rusting file cabinet. She pushed her wetsuit aside and brought out her workout duffle bag. Her mind drifted as she put on her running shorts and tank top.

“Shipwrecks, eh?” she mumbled to herself as she tied her shoes and turned on her iPod.

As she stepped onto US 1’s familiar pavement and turned right, she thought she might run to Marathon and back... ironically, it was about twenty-six miles round trip. The sun was hazy and she could see dense cloud cover rolling in far to the south. When she ran, she mostly listened to audio books. Stephen King was her favorite. Sometimes it was music, usually the Beatles or the Stones... never Jimmy Buffet, as that was just too cliché. Today, however, she was so distracted by the strange phone call that she had strapped it to her arm and put the ear buds in.

By the time she reached the island of Marathon, she had decided to call the man back this evening. The mystery... the enigma of it all... was just too much for her to ignore. She’d call, let him tell her what was sure to be his outrageous story, then tell him goodbye. At least that’s what she had thought. Much later she’d realize that was the moment that would forever change her life.

Slick with a sheen of sweat, and a pumping, healthy heart rate, she arrived back at the center near dusk. Chelsea had locked up. Megan punched in the keypad code at the back door and the lock chunked open. She walked in and grabbed the towel from her locker.

Her cellphone beeped, announcing she had a voicemail. She recognized the number from earlier; this Troy Bodean—whoever he was—had called back.

“Megan,” —the message was a bit garbled but understandable, probably the storm beginning to interfere with cellphones— “I think we got off on the wrong foot this morning. I didn’t mean to be so cryptic, but there are a lot of people who could be very dangerous regarding the information I wanted to discuss with you.”

The man paused for a second, as if deciding whether or not he should actually share his information. He seemed to have a nice voice, but it was difficult to tell with the bad reception.

“I’ve seen something in the water. Best I can tell is, it might be a cannon or something. I’ve done some checking, and based on location and what’s been found already, it’s what I think might be a Spanish Galleon, the Señora de la Muerta. I wanted to talk to you about what might be on that ship and possibly helping me dive the wreck. So... um... if you’re interested... well, we could meet at a public place, you choose when and where, and talk about it?” He paused again, apparently unsure what else to say. “Yeah, so... call me back, bye.”

Megan closed her phone. “Señora de la Muerta?” she said aloud to

no one. “The Lady of the Dead?” she translated.

She wondered what sailor in his right mind would get on such a ship; *hello and welcome aboard the Hindenburg Titanic*. She had never heard of it, but she knew there were hundreds of ships lost in these waters... many of which were loaded with gold and treasure and headed back from the new world.

A quick internet search told her that Señora de la Muerta was thought to be an empty ship that accompanied other ships on long journeys and served as a holding tank for sailors that died at sea but who didn’t want to be dumped overboard. Usually this privilege was reserved only for ranking officials on the ship, officials who would be stored with their personal belongings... often gold and jewelry.

“Ah,” —she shook her head— “so you’re after their gold, Mr. Bodean.”

She clicked off her computer and texted Troy a message.

—*Sloppy Joe’s tomorrow at noon.*

A minute later she received his reply.

—*You bet.*

Sloppy Joe's

Megan walked into Sloppy Joe's and scanned the bar for Troy.

It was one of the larger bars on Duval Street and almost always had a crowd of people sitting at the bar and the surrounding tables. A giant portrait of Ernest Hemingway hung at the back of the stage; Sloppy Joe's claimed he liked to frequent their bar. *If he witnessed the dance club atmosphere they turned on at night now, she thought, he'd never set foot in the place.*

Large garage doors lined the front and side and were now opened to the street. A longhaired kid was strumming on a guitar on the stage under a sign that said, *Smile, you're on Sloppy Joe's Web Cam.* That's when it hit her... she had no idea what he looked like. Suddenly, the bar's open-air front seemed a little *too* open, and she felt very vulnerable. She turned around to leave.

"Megan?" It was a smooth voice that sounded a bit salty, but somehow sounded handsome. She wasn't sure how she knew that, but it was somewhere between Matthew McConaughey's Texas drawl and George Clooney's sophisticated debonair clip, something she hadn't picked up during his phone calls with her. She took a deep breath and turned around.

He was only about five-foot-ten, but athletically built and not too broad. He looked to be around forty, and his face was deeply tanned with the raccoon-eyed sunglasses line all too common among seafarers on the island. His eyes were blue, but not piercing, or the blue described in so many novels as *ocean* or *azure*, or any cliché like that. His black, slightly salt and peppered hair looked like its only comb was attached to the ends of his hand and might not have been washed today. But he grinned, and showed that contrary to some of his outward appearance he did take some care of himself, with straight, clean teeth... something she always looked for in a man. And on top of his head, he wore a somewhat cheesy straw cowboy hat with a peacock feather stuck in the back... but it worked for him, gave him a little bit of Bret Michaels' flair. In short, she thought he was pretty

cute.

She shook her head suddenly. *Looked for in a man?? Pretty cute?? What am I thinking here?* This man was basically a pirate threatening to rape the shipwreck of the Señora de la Muerta. She gritted her teeth and walked toward him, determined not to like him.

He shook her hand and slid a chair back from his table for her. There were two waters, one with lemon and one with lime, and one tequila shot in front of him and a menu at each place setting.

"Well," Troy said, "I know you've done some checking, and I'm sure you know what the Muerta is all about."

Megan nodded.

"And I'm sure you think I intend to plunder the gold and leave the rest to rot away the local ecology," he added.

She took a sip of her lemon water. "I'm sure that's exactly what you intend to do," she said, trying to muster some acid in her tone.

He reached into his shirt pocket, took out her business card, and flipped it onto the table in front of her. She could see the idealistic, straight out of college optimism oozing from the card.

"And you think I'd try to hire someone like you if that's what I intended to do?" he asked.

Troy plucked the lime from the rim of his water glass, poured the tequila quickly down his throat, and hid his grimace with a quick squeeze of the lime.

"Give me twenty-four hours to convince you I'm on the level," he said, leaning forward, "and if I don't, you'll never hear from me again."

She peered into his eyes, trying to detect what crazy intentions this guy might have and whether or not he was feeding her a load of bull to get her alone with him. She stared hard, but he stayed relaxed. His smile seemed genuine, and he didn't appear to have an unseemly bone in his body. She wasn't sure why, but she felt strongly that he was on the up and up. She did promise herself to be cautious though.

"Fair enough," she said. "Twenty-four-hours, and I'm done."

"That's what you think," he said, and grinned, "Come on, I want to show you something."

He stood up and ushered her toward the door. The bartender noticed him leaving and rushed out from behind the bar.

"Troy, the tequila?" He held up a receipt.

"Put it on my tab," Troy called back as he hurried Megan out the door of Sloppy Joe's.

The bartender crumpled the receipt and tossed it into a nearby trash can.

Megan allowed Troy to lead her down Duval Street toward the tourist district. Soon they approached a building at the corner of

Whitehead and Greene that had a giant anchor outside the front door. The overhead sign declared it to be Mel Fisher's Maritime Heritage Museum.

"No doubt you've been here before?" Troy said and pointed to the building.

Megan nodded.

"People died to bring up the things in that building," he started, "and the irony is that none of it is really worth *that* much... without the historical context."

He took a step in front of her and turned to face her. "Sure, there are a couple million dollars' worth of gold and jewels in there, but the story of raising her and the story of her demise is where the real money is... could be billions."

She did nothing to hide her doubt. "Billions?"

"Yes, I want the money," he said and tilted his head to the side, "but the money I want is walking in and out of that door over there."

He pointed again to the stream of tourists exiting the museum, with shirts and books and replica coins. This was definitely sounding a little far-fetched.

"Okay, darlin', maybe not billions, but look, I'm offering you the chance to help me bring the Muerta up right, and tell her story as faithfully as you can."

She took a long silent look into his eyes... maybe they were a bit piercing.

"Let me show you one more thing, and then I'll rest my case. "He took her hand and led her down Whitehead Street toward *Tortuga Adventures*; nothing is very far away on Key West.

Troy jerked open the door of the sales office, startling R.B., who was on the phone and busily selling tourist luncheons to Fort Jefferson. He grabbed a set of dangling keys from a pegboard just inside the door.

"Back in a bit."

R.B. held up a finger in a *wait just a second* gesture. Troy ignored that and closed the door to the office. He motioned toward the yellow and white seaplane rocking gently off the dock. She was still in the water awaiting an evening tour and had more than enough fuel to get her there and back again. The FAA frowned upon such takeoffs, but Troy knew a few ex-Navy people who worked for them now, and as long as he was careful, he could get away with it.

"Let's go," he said, and guided her into the plane's cockpit.

Within seconds they were off the water and headed toward the island fort.

"And just where the hell do you think you're going?" R.B.'s voice crackled over the radio, "or do I even want to know?"

“Don’t worry, buddy,” —Troy smiled and winked at Megan— “I’ll have *Gidget* back before the next run.”

“You’re killin’ me here,” R.B. said but with a trace of a smile in his tone. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Have you ever known me to do anything like that?” Troy retorted back with his own smile. “See ya in a bit.”

“Roger that.”

“Gidget?” Megan asked, her eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, that’s what we call the plane... it’s a long story.” Troy turned them toward the west. “Maybe I’ll tell you one day while we’re enjoying the spoils of our find.”

She looked out the window to the open gulf water below them.

“I haven’t agreed to do this yet, Mr. Bodean.”

“You will,” he said, winking again, “you will.”

The seaplane whizzed across the gulf, with her north side facing bright sunlight and on her south side in the distance the darkness of the coming storm. Troy knew time was against them, and that he had to convince Megan quickly. He figured they had about a week before the hurricane buried any hope they had of finding the Muerta.

After about half an hour, Troy checked his G.P.S. reading and began to scan the water below them. He soon spotted his recent discovery.

“Look there,” he said, and nodded to Megan and pointed down.

“What? Where?”

He leaned over and held his arm outstretched in front of her. The water was not yet muddied from the storm surge and was only fifty-feet deep to the top of the coral reef. A dark oblong shape jutted out from the side of the coral wall.

“I see it, but what is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know? Timber, a cannon? I can’t tell.”

“Have you been down?”

“No, not yet,” he said, and circled the plane over it a few more times. “I didn’t want to draw any attention to it.”

She could feel her pulse quicken and she strained to see any detail she could make out on the sunken object, but it was too deep, just a dark shape. She signaled for him to make another pass and he banked the plane around again.

He flew a little lower and she could tell it was definitely not a natural ocean feature. Her palms began to sweat; the fever had suddenly caught her. She would help him, at least with this first dive. If this object should prove to have archaeological merit, it could be a very important find. Her thoughts drifted to the money it would take to bring her up... she wondered idly if he had checked her out and learned she had a trust fund that would more than cover the cost of

this operation. She brushed the thought away; probably not smart enough for that. It didn't matter; she'd gladly give that money up for a discovery of this potential magnitude.

"We need a magnetometer," she blurted out suddenly, "and a boat."

"A magne-whatsit?" he asked with a smile. "Darlin', I don't speak Spanish or scientist, so I have no idea what you just said, but I think I can get us a boat."

Megan laughed. *Okay, so he is pretty charming after all.*

Troy nodded, and after a few more circles around the mysterious object in the water, he turned the plane back toward Key West.



IN THE DISTANCE, silent waves flapped against the side of a small fishing boat. Its captain watched the seaplane disappear into the distance.

"They were very close," he spoke into the ship's radio. "I'm pretty sure they saw it. They circled it a few times."

"Keep an eye on them," came the reply, "and don't let 'em bring anything up. If we can hold 'em off for a week, the hurricane will carry everything away."

"Yes sir." The captain hung the radio receiver up and started his boat's engines.

He motored casually toward the shore, loosely following the local fishing routes. It wouldn't matter if he was spotted; he was well known here and had caught enough this morning to cover his story of a day-fishing expedition. He wondered idly what they thought they had found.

With a smirk, he thought it might be fun to see the looks on their faces when they realized how wrong they were.

Detective Joe Bond reached for the knob on the outdated AC unit next to his desk to see if the fan would go any higher. It wouldn't. He scratched his close-cropped hair above a high hairline and dabbed the sweat from his forehead. He undid the top button on his cream-colored linen shirt. On days like today, nothing would stave off the heat of a late summer, early fall day in Key West. With the elevated temperature always came an acute pain in his lower back, where a hollow-point 9mm slug sat adjacent to his spine. On the worst days, the pain would be almost crippling. So, rather than take his normal stroll to lunch over on Duval Street, he thought he'd sit this one out, literally.

He stared at the NYPD badge encased on his wall. His mind drifted back to walking the beat in foot-deep snow, and today it didn't seem like such a bad thing. Heck, just walking anywhere without pain would be nice. But it had been on one of those cold winter days that he chased the wrong punk down the wrong alley and ended up with three shots in his back from the punk's friend. The vest had caught the first two, allowing them to *only* break his ribs and shatter a vertebra. But the third one clipped the edge of the vest, bounced off a low vertebra and lodged on the front side of it. Had the impact not left Joe temporarily paralyzed and motionless in the snow, the little punk would have realized he was still alive and finished him off.

But instead, Joe spent the next twenty minutes face down in the snow, alive, awake, totally unable to move and thoroughly convinced he was about to die. As he'd lain there watching the snow pile up in front of his face he could hear the deafening silence; the snow gently falling in front of his eyes; and the cat. That damned cat. Grey, curious, mangy, and bony thin. It had walked over to him, rubbed noses and then sat down to stare at him, as if to watch him die. From his prostrate position, he had drifted off, his last thought being that the wretched thing had six toes on each foot.

Rehab was difficult. He cashed out from the NYPD with an early

pension, despite being only four and a half decades old. To avoid spending time around the house, he spent too much time in the local cop bar. He tried to remain *one of the boys*, but the stories became harder and harder for him to follow. He'd fallen out of the loop, and there was no going back.

Then came the night he skipped the bar and went straight home, hoping to surprise his wife, only to be surprised himself. With his back injury, he knew he'd been neglecting bedroom duty with her, and apparently she'd been getting that with someone else. Joe spent the next week at a friend's place looking for a new life that was anywhere but there.

He found a posting from Monroe County, Florida, which was looking to recruit talent from major metropolitan police forces. He responded, talked to some people on the phone, sent in his glowing resume, and very soon had a job offer. It was far enough away to assure him he would never collide with his old life again.

Before he left town, he returned to the alley. He wanted once more to see that miserable place where his life had forever changed, maybe to say a symbolic goodbye. As he stepped over the muck, around the garbage, and between the trash cans, he found where he had laid in the snow and contemplated the life he had thought would end right there.

That's when he'd heard the meow. Out from under a box crawled a familiar face. The cat! He could hardly believe the thing was still here, looking at him as if to say, *what took you so long?* The next day, Joe had boarded a plane for Key West, Florida with an extra carry on.

His phone rang and brought him back to the very hot and humid present. The caller ID indicated it was Ed "Skipper" Johnson. Joe knew why he was calling.

"Yeah? Hi Skipper... No, nothing this month... I know, I'm sorry too... No, it's never a bother... Yes, of course I'll call if anything breaks."

For nearly a year now, Skipper Johnson had been calling for any updates about his two boys. Mark and Randy had been murdered at last year's Fantasy Fest—a world famous island celebration of Halloween. They were found on a boat drifting some fifty miles west of the island, both with their throats slit. The last week of October being the busiest of the year, naturally the entire island was full of possible suspects, as thousands come and go by road, boat and plane every hour.

Joe knew this hadn't been a typical Key West crime. There was no bar fight. No drunken brawl. No half-dozen tourist witnesses. No drugs. No organized crime. Nothing. The boys were slashed with a knife, leaving a ton of blood on the boat... but it all tested out to be

just theirs. Who would want to kill a couple of boys whose only sins were free diving in places where they weren't supposed to? Their boat was found unmolested, aside from the blood. Curiously, from bow to stern the only thing taken was their G.P.S. He'd even gone to the trouble to hire a dive team to check out the general area where they'd been found. Nothing there either; they had probably drifted many miles before they'd been found. It just didn't make sense.

The boys had been partying it up for two weeks before Halloween, engaging in typical tourist activity. The newest bartender at the Iguana heard them whispering about *something big* they had found diving a local reef, but of course they didn't say what or where it was.

So, these boys thought they found a sunken treasure, eh? Joe thought.

Thousands of people dive the waters of Key West; there's nothing out there worth killing anyone over. It's all been pillaged already. Tourists were the only ones on the island who still believed in gold at the bottom of the sea. By all accounts, it looked random and meaningless. But Joe had seen meaningless crime, and this one didn't fit that bill at all well. The peculiar theft of the G.P.S. had him mystified. He had just a few pieces of the puzzle and couldn't see very much of the big picture. He rubbed his back and opened the file one more time.

In the corner of Joe's office, Lucky purred and curled himself into a ball for a noontime nap.

Vince Pinzioni, the newest owner of Captain Tony's, was carrying a case of Corona Light from the storeroom up to the front bar when he saw them walk in; Troy Bodean, and some cute young thing he'd probably picked up trolling Duval Street for the late summer college girls. *Typical*, he thought. He put the case of beer down on the bar, then poured Troy's usual shot of Jager and popped the top off a cold Yuengling.

"And for the lady?"

Megan shook her head.

"Suit yuhself."

Vince went back to his work shuffling beer into the iced coolers under the bar. Troy took a sip of his shot and gave Megan a look as if to say, *let me do the talking*.

"Hey, Vince," Troy started nervously. "Say, how's that old boat of yours?" He gulped his shot of Jager and washed it down with a swig of beer.

"Ah, she's doin' great," Vince said and smiled. "Took her out yesterday."

"Catch anything?"

"Coupla barracudas," Vince said, nodding at Megan. "Most people don't know they're good eatin'."

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but Troy quickly jumped in before she could speak.

"Say, you don't suppose I could borrow her one weekend."

Vince wrinkled his brow and then started to laugh. "You?" He picked up the empty beer box and turned back toward the store room. "Yeah, dat'll be the day," he said as he disappeared.

Again, Megan started to say something, but Troy shushed her. Vince reappeared with another case of beer.

"No, seriously," Troy said casually, "I just wanted to take my friend Megan out for a cruise, and I know you have a nice boat."

Vince wiped his hand on a towel behind the bar and reached up to

shake her hand.

"Very nice ta meet you, miss," he said and looked back toward Troy, "but it'll be a cold frickin' day in Key West before I loan my boat to this guy."

It was at this point Megan stunned both Troy and Vince by leaning far too inappropriately over the bar.

"Awww, that's too bad," she said with her cheesiest pouty face. "I just bought the cutest little bikini. I guess I'll just have to wear it out by the pool. I have the most dreadful tan lines I need to get rid of."

Vince's eyes went slightly wider and he somehow managed to keep his jaw from hitting the bar. If he hadn't been staring at Megan's tank top, he might've noticed Troy's jaw was in much the same position.

"Well, I mean..." Vince stammered a bit, trying to regain his composure, and oddly his words lost their New York accent. "... I guess you could go out for a quick trip."

He suddenly seemed to snap back to reality. "But I'm goin' wit you," he said, and shook a finger at Troy.

"Awww," Megan chimed in again, batting her eyelashes a little too much, "that's sooo sweet of you."

She leaned over a touch more and gave Vince a quick peck on the cheek.

"Don't I know it," he winked at her.

Troy just grinned and finished his beer.

"So, when are we goin' on this party cruise?" Vince rubbed his palms together.

"How's tomorrow morning?" Troy asked.

"Ouch, Saturday?" Vince said through a grimace. "How 'bout we go early on Sunday, I can't leave the bar on the biggest day of the week."

This time it was Megan who jumped in before Troy could protest. "Perfect," she said, and smiled brightly, "say around nine?"

"Nine it is." Vince grinned, wondering just what kind of bikini she'd be wearing.

Megan grabbed Troy by the arm and led him out of the bar.

"What the heck?" he asked. "He's comin' with us now? And why Sunday?"

"Waiting till Sunday will give me time to drive back up to Islamorada and borrow a magnetometer from the center," she explained. "And don't worry about him. I have my ways."

"Ahh," he said, "but that's not what I was talking about... I was wondering about your little show in there."

"Never underestimate the power of a woman," she said, and winked.

He grinned, and she suddenly saw there was a little Tom Cruise in

his smile. As they walked down Duval, she realized she was still holding his arm and could feel herself blush a little, but she didn't let go.

"You know," Troy said, glancing at her, "Friday night is a good time to be in Key West."

"Oh no you don't, you're not gonna talk me into anything crazy." Megan shook her head.

"Actually, I was just hoping you'd buy me a beer."

"Ha, it seems like you have good credit all over town!"

"Ouch."

She laughed and tugged his arm. "I'll buy you a beer, Bodean," she said and winked, "but tonight we're going to the bar I want to go to."

"Fair enough, and just which one would that be?"

"Irish Kevin's. I am a northern girl you know, and there's nothing like a good Irish bar," she said, exaggerating *bah* in her best Boston *Southie* accent.

Troy grimaced visibly and she couldn't help but ask.

"Is there something wrong with that?"

He rubbed the back of his neck as if it was suddenly aching. "I'm sure Kevin has long forgotten about that night."

She laughed raucously. "It's a wonder *you* remember that night! What was it? You and a bunch of strippers bust up his place?"

He didn't answer and he didn't laugh. She quickly changed the subject.

"Well, you have nothing to fear, Troy. I'll make sure you don't get too rowdy tonight, and I'll actually *pay* for the beers we drink!"

His mood lightened. "Sounds like a plan, but maybe we should sit near the back just in case." He smiled and eventually told her he was just kidding, no strippers, no busted bar... just a long overdue tab. As they entered Irish Kevin's he put his hand on her waist.

"Now about this bikini..."

Object Fear

Troy and Vince watched as Megan unloaded her equipment from the hatchback of her 94' Honda civic. It was green at one time, but now the paint was streaked and peeling in a few places on the top and hood. Her rearview mirror was decorated with a pink and purple lei and several strands of what appeared to be Mardi Gras beads. Her radio antenna was topped with a small plastic dolphin (*so I can find it in the mall parking lot*, she would later tell them).

She had a small dive tank in one hand and another mysterious object in the other. It had a dark blue cylinder at the top, with a few dials and knobs attached to a four-foot-long wire-wrapped pole, and ended in a smaller white cylinder at the bottom.

She could see Troy's confusion, and when Vince couldn't see, mouthed the word, "Magnetometer."

"Ah," he said and took both from her.

Next, she brought out a buoyancy vest, flippers and a mask, and handed those to Vince.

"We goin' divin'?" he asked.

She batted her eyelashes and let her blouse open a little to reveal the tiniest piece of her red bikini. "If you don't mind?"

Vince's smile widened and he winked. "Not at all, sweetie. Anything you wanna do is fine by me, sugar."

Her last trip to the car brought out a bottle of Castillo Rum (the cheap stuff), a few plastic cups, and a two-liter bottle of Coke. She put the Coke down and slammed the hatch twice before it would latch.

"Are we ready," she said, and smiled while bundling the drinks in her arms.

"Let's do this," Vince said and led them down the dock to his boat.

Megan had expected a typical Key West fishing boat, basically a platform, a tower, and a bunch of rods, but this was more like a cabin cruiser—complete with double bed underneath. The stern was emblazoned with the boat's name, *The Ocean Blue*. The three of them piled on and Vince cranked up the radio. Bob Marley sang to them as

they unmoored and pulled away from the dock. Vince parked himself behind the wheel and sang along as they idled out to the first buoy.

Troy took off his shirt and tamed his flapping hair with his trademark cowboy hat. Megan did the same, tying her hair into a ponytail under her Dolphin Research Center cap. She couldn't help but notice Troy smiling at her... apparently he liked the red bikini too.

They spent the better part of the morning whizzing around like vacationers, tanning, drinking rum and coke, and listening to beach music. Megan made sure Vince had double, sometimes even triple the amount of rum, while hers and Troy's drinks gradually became straight Coke.

It wasn't long before he was snoozing on the double bed under the bow and Troy had taken the wheel. He turned the boat toward his G.P.S. coordinates and Megan readied her dive equipment.

Within half an hour, they were floating just above the edge of the reef where he had seen his mystery object. Megan strapped on her diving gear, tested her regulator, clicked a button on the magnetometer to check the battery life, and splashed backward off the boat.

The waters were teeming with an astounding array of fish and sea life. The coral was home to an amazing rainbow of colors and it wasn't easy to find Troy's discovery. She loved the water and everything in it, and for a few minutes she just took it all in, floating in the peaceful calm of the quiet reef.

A couple of spotted morays whooshed by and a cloud of jewfish paused to check her out but quickly resumed their flashing swim. A four-foot long barracuda momentarily sent a shiver up her spine, with his sharp fangs jutting from his jaw, but he seemed only curious, like the rest of them.

As she floated there with no particular direction in mind, she saw no sign of the object they had seen from the air... *maybe it was an optical illusion*, she thought, *some shaft cut into the coral that looked dark and solid from above?* Visibility was less than thirty feet, an effect of the coming hurricane. This search would be slow going.

She began to swing the magnetometer back and forth, much like a metal detector. It would record and transmit its findings back to her laptop for later investigation. She ventured farther out from the reef, trying to maintain a straight line to the west, and after about a hundred yards of searching she began to lose hope. There was nothing down there; just sand and fish and coral.

She turned to head back toward the boat, and that's when she saw the looming dark shape in front of her. However, this wasn't Troy's dark shape; this one was moving in her general direction. She froze in place, not panicked yet, and waited to see what was coming to check

her out.

As it swam closer through the cloudy water and slowly gaining detail, Megan began to recognize the telltale features of a bull shark; wide short snout, tall harshly pointed first dorsal fin taller than the second, and row upon row of razor sharp teeth. It was coming straight at her. Distinctively grey on top, white underneath, and very broad, this one looked to be about eleven feet in length; she guessed from its size it was a female. She could see a slightly distended belly. *Great, she's pregnant*, Megan thought to herself. The maternal bull would be hungry and feeding. It was swimming closer.

She began to tense up now, her pulse racing, and against her will, her breathing became hurried and shallow. From her studies, she knew that Bull sharks were very aggressive and accounted for a great number of attacks on people. Until now, she'd never actually seen one in the flesh, but she knew they eat anything that moves. So, she did what any good diver knows to do; she tried to keep calm and stay completely motionless.

She knew she was too far from the boat for Troy to even realize this was happening, and wondered idly if he'd even find her body. For what seemed an eternity, the shark seemed content to just cruise around the general area while scavenging for food. Not a good sign; she appeared to be hunting.

Like an alarm bell in the dead silence, a ping went off from Megan's tank and the shark turned instantly toward her. She looked down at the dial on her wrist; about ten minutes of air left. The shark quickened its pace and Megan was sure she could hear her own thumping heartbeat. She struggled to maintain slow, regulated breathing to conserve her air, but that all flies out the window when there's a massive shark on your trail. She found herself subconsciously wafting away from the beast.

With quickness she could never have anticipated, the shark darted at her, and Megan jerked away instinctively. The monster's snout bumped her harshly in the stomach and she did what all those Discovery Channel rescue shows say the survivors did; she slammed the magnetometer down hard on the shark's snout. With the density of the water slowing her swing down, she knew the blow was largely ineffective. The shark bit down hard on the end of the sophisticated piece of equipment, instantly turning it into scrap metal.

For a second it looked as if the shark was puzzled. It nudged past her and she resisted the urge to swim frantically back toward the boat. Megan was sure a second bite was coming, but amazingly the shark turned and swam away. Apparently, it was convinced this object it had found in the water was too hard to be food.

For several moments, she drifted in the gentle gulf current,

mentally paralyzed by the attack. She could feel tears coming down her cheeks inside her mask. Finally, as she began heading back toward the boat, her tank pinged again. She quickly looked around to see if the shark had heard it and was coming back for another try. Nothing.

Five minutes of air would get her most of the way back to the boat. She focused on slowing her breathing and swam as quickly as she could, and soon the reef and boat were in sight. With just twenty yards remaining she began to make out some detail in the reef, and as she got closer she idly glanced back to the north, the direction the shark had come from... and there it was.

Troy's mystery object.

It was lodged in the side of the reef, but the coral had advanced considerably, nearly consuming it. She couldn't tell what it was from this distance, but she could see it definitely wasn't part of the natural reef formation. That's when her air finally ran out and she had to hold her breath and swim up. They'd missed the object to the south... but just barely.

As she broke the surface of the water, she saw Troy peering over the edge, obviously wondering where she'd been. He motored over and helped her on deck. She dropped her tank and what was left of the magnetometer, jerked off her mask, and hugged him with ferocity. She trembled with fear, tears forming again. He didn't say a word; he just let her regain her composure in his arms.

When she felt she could speak without breaking down again, she whispered in his ear. "I saw it. It's down there."

George Wyatt stood on the highest deck of the oil rig, *Wyatt 1*,

and looked west across the Gulf at the setting sun. He closed his eyes in the warm glow and listened to the sound of... nothing. No cars. No horns. No telephones. No radios. No televisions. There was no sound here but the massive machines below him rumbling in the deep and groaning like whales. His machines. His sound. His steel island in the sun.

He had spent as much time here this year as he could. The rest he had spent with his brother in Houston arguing over their father's fortune. They weren't arguing with each other, mind you, but against the twenty-six-year-old widow his father left behind, complete with a poorly written will that appeared to leave most of the family fortune to her. *Typical of the old man*, George thought with a grin. Always a gambler. Always a risk taker. Never thinking of the long term.

George was part of a small, elite group of young turks who called themselves New Oil. They were all either children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren of American oil interests. They met annually to discuss plans and coordinate their efforts against OPEC. Their numbers had been thinned out in past decades as families sold out to the international conglomerates, but a few were too stubborn to sell. The remaining members were all idealists and dreamers who wanted America to be oil-independent, and they had family money to back them up.

George was a member because his great-grandfather was one of the original band of Texas *wildcatters* who just happened to stick his pipe in the right hole.

George's grandfather had increased the business tenfold when he took over, but his father had gone into refining raw oil instead of digging for it. George liked the sea, so he ventured into offshore *wildcatting*, which costs a few million just to think about, and ten million to actually start up. That was going to be his contribution to New Oil and also how he would increase the family fortune, just like

his father before him.

But then *Bebe* swooped in after George's mother had died, and was his new stepmother before he knew she existed. When his dad passed, the money George expected wasn't there. Now, it was all going to Bebe and the bloodsucking lawyers. Unfortunately, George had already committed tens of millions of his family's money to *Wyatt 1*, and he couldn't back out now. And so far, the drills had been coming up bone dry.

"Purty, ain't it, boss?"

The unmistakable baritone voice booming in George's ear could only be rig boss Bill Bane. He'd come to Texas from a poor black family in Louisiana. He and five older brothers had set out to make their fortunes in the oil business; one had died on the job, and three had quit and gone back to New Orleans. But Bill's career had flourished. Not many young black men made it in the oil business in those days, but he and George had hit it off immediately while working in one of George's grandfather's refineries, and Bill took to the roughneck work quickly.

He was easily the hardest worker on the crew. When George embarked on *Wyatt 1*, he knew who he wanted to run it. While not an engineer or a geologist, Bane had *oil in his veins*. He knew how the stuff flowed and what it took to get it out of the ground.

"Takes a black man to really understand black gold," he'd bellow loudly.

His height, strong build, booming voice and gregarious nature made him a natural leader and an inspiration to the roughnecks working under him. His signature phrase, *how 'bout today*, was a daily dose of optimism for a crew of guys looking for a patch of black liquid a mile below and hundreds of miles from civilization. It had become a challenge among the crew to see who could work harder and longer than Bane... so far none had been successful.

It's funny, George thought, *how each generation goes to the sea looking for something new. It used to be food. Then it was a New World. Then it was pirate gold. Now it's oil. What will the next generation seek in the deep blue?*

"It's gorgeous, Bill. I'm envious you get to see it all the time."

"It never gets old, George." Bill called him *boss* when he wanted to be formal, and *George* when he wanted to remind him they were friends first, business partners second.

"Say, aren't you guys late for New Orleans?"

"We're ready. Gene is powering down the systems to idle so nothing too bad can happen while we're gone. A few of the guys are going to stay on board to keep things together. Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

“No, I think I’ll stay. If this thing is going to bankrupt me, at least I’m going to get some sunsets out of it.”

“George, we’ll hit something soon. I promise. Gene is doing some amazing things with these systems you’ve installed. I’ve never seen anything like it. Once we hit bedrock, we’ll be able to pick up sounds and vibrations from farther away than anyone imagined. You’d be amazed. I’ll bet the C.I.A. doesn’t even have shit like this.”

“Oh, I’ll bet they do. Listen, you and the boys go have a good time. You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks boss. It was nice of you to show up and give us a surprise vacation like this. We won’t forget it.”

“Take care Bill, and don’t pick on the tourist pilots this time!”

Bill had, in a card game on a recent trip to Key West, wagered the pilot’s bar tab against a free ride back to the rig for him and his crew. The pilot lost, flew everyone back to the rig, and then didn’t have the fuel to get home. Ironical that they were sitting on tons and tons of *fuel*, with not a single drop of Jet-A for his seaplane. Poor guy spent hours here waiting for fuel to arrive. His punishment was having to listen to Gene ramble on about the rig’s amazing sonar and drilling systems.

That had been the beginning of a year-long friendship with the pilot, Troy Bodean. And they had agreed to stash a fifty-gallon drum of fuel on the rig so the poor guy wouldn’t get stuck again.

George’s thoughts drifted to more serious matters. Bill was a good guy, but would never forgive George if he knew why he had made this sudden visit. It’s amazing who comes out of the shadows when you have a mile-long drill bit sunk into the bottom of the Gulf in a place where no one else has been. It’s also amazing what a man is willing to do to keep his family fortune from going to the bottom of the gulf. George looked out at the darkening water. He would soon go to the mess hall for coffee, because he had a long night ahead of him.



AT THE SAME TIME, somewhere on the western coast of Cuba, the setting sun told Hector Martinez it was time to go. He fired up the Pratt & Whitney PT6A turbine engine in his long, slender boat and coasted out of the harbor. He increased the throttle to let the six hundred horses behind him do their thing. Even with a full load in the cargo hold, the boat shot up on top of the water and leveled off at seventy-five miles-per-hour. He just hoped his U.S. contact had taken care of the government patrol boats as promised, or this was going to be a short trip.

He practiced his lines in his best Cuban peasant accent. If he made it past the boats, he’d be at his destination in six hours, in the middle

of the night like his contact preferred. This wasn't the first time he had made this moonlight voyage; confidently, he engaged the G.P.S. autopilot and set a direct course for the *Wyatt 1*.

Report

Natasha Wainwright was making her evening rounds at Fort

Jefferson, locking gates, picking up stray litter, and checking the beach for stowaway visitors, when her *sat* phone beeped.

A single word text message from an anonymous number simply read:

-REPORT.

She knew this was an automated message sent to operatives stationed throughout the United States, and wasn't really all that urgent. But she knew that dallying around and not electronically sending in her packet this evening would bring swift investigation.

Not that it mattered; she hadn't heard a thing since she'd been sent here to this ghost town of a fort.

As she made her way down the endless halls toward the rangers' quarters, she began to hear the echoing voice of James Howard. He was warbling along with Jimmy Buffett's standard, *A Pirate Looks At Forty*. When she opened the door, he stumbled a bit, surprised at her quick entrance. He jerked his legs down from a reclining position on his desk and quickly hid his beer between his legs.

He was a little more than chubby, his belly extending past his waist, and he had a clump of curly red hair perched on his head like a bird's nest. His beard, if you could call it that, was scruffy and dark. He probably hadn't bothered to shave for the weekend.

"Natasha... what uh... what um..." He was clearly nervous. "I thought uh, you had rounds."

"Yeah, finished that a few minutes ago."

"Oh um, okay."

There was a bit of an awkward silence, and James' eyes flitted around the room.

Natasha walked over to the desk and tapped the faux wood-on-steel top. "You gonna share that beer or what?" she said with a wink.

James' mouth opened a little wider. "Sure, I um... I think I may have one here."

He put his own beer back up on the desk and walked over to the slightly smaller than normal refrigerator. It was covered in local bar magnets and pictures from amazingly drunken forays out and about in Key West. James opened the door, and the clinking of bottles rattling in vegetable drawers and the clanking of more stuffed in the door made Natasha laugh out loud.

"You sure you didn't want to put any food in there?"

James smiled as he handed her the beer. "Why? I've got all the nutrition I need right here; barley, hops, water."

Natasha made a dramatic show of *trying* to open her beer and handed it back to James. "A little help?"

"Oh of course," James said, and almost swayed around the desk.

She laughed playfully. "And just how many of these have you had tonight?"

"Oh, I dunno," James said as he wobbled back to his chair, "two, three... twelve, something like that."

Natasha sat down on the guest sofa and raised her beer. "Thanks for the beer. Cheers."

"Anytime, I always have a good supply. Troy keeps me stocked up." He made a clinking gesture toward her raised beer and then swallowed about half of it in one gulp. "Yeah, that's a great guy there, Troy." James nodded enthusiastically.

"Mmhmm," Natasha agreed as she sipped her own beer.

"He really deserves the best."

"Yep."

"Hope he finds that damn boat." James' eyes suddenly went wide. He clearly realized he'd said something he wasn't supposed to say.

Natasha sat up straight on the couch. "Boat?" she drank the last of her beer and handed the empty nonchalantly to James. "Beer me."

This seemed to relax him as he popped open another.

"What boat?"

"Ah, I'm not really supposed to tell anybody about it, but since I guess he knows you and all," —James scratched the back of his neck — "it's just a shipwreck or somethin' he's been looking for."

Natasha tried for the next few minutes to find out what Troy was up to, but James had clamped up his mouth tight... except for the intake of more beer.

She shrugged as if to say, eh, no big deal. Then she snapped her fingers and raised her eyebrows. "You know what would really be good right now?"

James' drunken eyes took on a mischievous glint and he leaned over the desk closer to her. "What's that, kitty cat?"

She almost rolled her eyes. "Not that, silly," she said, and smiled playfully. "Some tequila!"

James' eyes returned to being a drunken, happy glint. "Aha," he said, standing up unsteadily and opening the freezer door, "I just happen to have some fresh Patron from our mutual friend, Nate. Will that do?"

"Absolutely!" She thought it would be a perfect information lubricant.

Five or six shots later, Natasha was glad she'd been dumping them into a nearby plant. James' eyes were bloodshot and half closed and he was reeling on the edge of passing out.

"So, tell me," —Natasha stood up and faked a stumble— "what's all this about a boat?"

"Oh yeah," James said, rocking a bit, "Troy says he's gonna find a big boat, a wrecked one..."

He listed so far to his right that Natasha had to catch him and prop him back up in his chair.

"What boat is he looking for?"

"Ummmm... I dunno, he said somethin' like Senorita De Murray."

He was drunk and slurring so badly she couldn't be sure it was what he'd said.

"Senorita De Murray?" She didn't even have to pretend to be drunk anymore.

"No, no... uh..." He scratched his scruffy chin and a bit of drool dribbled down it. "It's the Señora, yeah, the Señora De somethin'. Somethin' like Marta."

Her heart began to beat normally again. It didn't sound like this was going to be a problem. Troy was apparently on some foolish treasure hunt. *Typical*, she thought to herself. She let James slump forward and pass out on his desk. He began snoring loudly and gurgling noises were echoing around his stomach.

Natasha quickly turned and walked out the door, heading toward her bunkhouse. As she turned the key in her front door lock, her phone beeped again.

"Oh hell, the report," she whispered, turning on her light and booting up her laptop. She tapped out a quick report form with her ID number and message.

-Things are moving slowly. Just received key info. Will follow up with details tomorrow.

She hit the send button, and not thirty seconds later the reply simultaneously hit her phone and her inbox.

-Good.

She leaned back in her desk chair and rolled her neck around. She picked up her phone and texted Troy.

-Flying tomorrow?

-Yup.

-*See you then.*

-You bet.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re up to, Troy, but it better not be what I think it is,” she muttered to herself. She turned back to her computer and opened up an encrypted file. A chart of Key West and its surrounding waters slowly filled her screen. An accompanying document showed records of hurricane patterns for the last several hundred years and ocean current patterns as documented by the National Weather Archives. It was so up-to-date it even had a storm track of the impending Hurricane Daniel.

Natasha tapped her computer screen with a pen. “If I was a top secret wreck at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico... where would I be?”

It was the beginning of a long night and, unbeknownst to her, the beginning of an even longer week.

We Need A Better Boat

Troy Bodean studied Megan Simons' shivering form as she slept restlessly on his garage sale southwestern design foldout couch. He couldn't help but remember a very similar scene playing out in his former Pawleys Island beach house with... um... Sarah? Kelly? He couldn't quite recall her name. Eh, another lifetime ago.

The houseboat was rocking more intensely with the harsh waves that preceded the incoming bad weather. He wondered idly how much of his home would be left if Hurricane Daniel got a hold of it.

Megan had been frantic when she came out of the water; a bull shark had bumped her and put her in a panic. She kept rambling on about the crumpled magnetometer and how the center was going to kill her, but she also said she'd seen the object in the coral. Her air supply had run out before she could get a closer look. Troy was pacing back and forth, knowing he had to let her get some sleep but wanting to dive again as quickly as possible.

Julie Matthews, the anchorwoman on Channel 7, was droning on in the background about the hurricane's path and evacuation reports. The Keys were now under a tourist evacuation; a full evacuation was probably only a day behind.

Troy walked over to the kitchen and pulled a small bottle of Jagermeister out of the freezer. He quickly raced two shots down his throat and grimaced with the cold burn. He glanced at the television with tinfoil rabbit ears. Even in the snowy picture, he saw that the storm track put the hurricane directly over the location of his find. He poured another shot. He sat down on the edge of his bed and waited until the liquor finally put him out.

In the predawn early morning haze, he could just make out someone sitting at his small folding dining room table. His eyes wouldn't yet adjust to the light.

"Who's there?" he said, realizing he still had a shot glass in one hand and an empty Jager bottle in the other.

The figure stood up and walked toward him. Megan's form slowly

came into focus. She had a coffee cup in one hand and a computer printout in the other.

"Here," she said, handing him the steaming cup of coffee and taking the shot glass and bottle from him. "I don't know why you do this to yourself."

Troy blew across the top of the mug and took a temperature-testing sip. The warmth of the coffee slid down his throat, mildly burning the tip of his tongue.

"I'm a pirate, pirates drink rum," he said and mock toasted with his mug.

Megan just shook her head and dumped the bottle and shot glass both in the trash can by the front door. Troy didn't have the strength to protest, but he made a mental note to rescue the shot glass later when she wasn't looking. He groaned as he rose to his feet, stuck his hat on his head, and walked over to the table where she was again sitting.

She had a map spread out with a few markings on it, and a computer printout with a jagged line running through it that looked like an EEG graph.

"Look at this," she said as she pointed to the map. "Here's where we stopped the boat."

She traced a line to the west with several circles drawn in red.

"As I swam this direction, the magnetometer flashed each time something registered."

"Mmkay." Troy nodded and sipped his coffee. "I have no idea what that means."

"It means that it was probably seeing some things that weren't just ocean junk," she said and turned toward him. "I can't know for sure without checking the readings, but it means I think we've found your ship."

A surge of emotion hit him and his stomach tightened. In his excitement he grabbed Megan by both arms and kissed her. Her eyes went wide and she stared at him, mouth gaping.

"Hot Dang!" he exclaimed.

She was staring wide-eyed at him, and he realized what he'd done.

Oh, um... I uh..." he stammered. "I'm sorry I got so excited."

For a few seconds, she turned and looked at the map.

Oops, Troy thought, *I royally screwed that up*. "Okay, um, so, what do we do now," he said and quickly changed the subject.

"Well, don't get your hopes up just yet," she said as she brushed a stray hair back from her forehead. "I need a computer to download and check this data. And, we really need to dive it again, but this time we need a better boat and some more accurate readings. And a camera might be good, too."

Troy stripped off his dirty shirt and replaced it with a fresh *Tortuga Adventures* shirt.

"We could really use some help, too," she continued, "as I'm not really keen on going into shark infested waters alone again... and is that the only kind of shirt you own?"

He looked down at his work polo. "Why, what's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," she said, standing up from the table, "I was just hoping to borrow some clean clothes.

Troy finally realized she'd long since removed her soaking clothes and been in his robe since yesterday. He rummaged through his closet and pulled out a long sleeved, blue button down and some khaki cargo shorts.

"I think that's all I have that's clean."

"It'll do just fine." She paused, holding the clothes and staring at him blankly.

"What?"

She nodded toward the front door. "I just need a minute."

"Oh, yeah, right," he said, quickly stepping outside.



SHE EXITED the rocking houseboat to see Troy in the driver's seat of her Honda. She sat down in the passenger's seat and began rolling up the sleeves of the button down, it too sporting the *Tortuga Adventures* logo.

"We going somewhere?" she asked, pulling her ponytail through the back of her baseball cap.

"I think I know where I can get us a better boat."

Troy glanced at the magnetometer printout in Megan's lap.

"And a computer to find out more about those readings."



VINCE PINZIONI WOKE up to the sloshing of waves against the side of his boat. He put his hand to his forehead and massaged his aching brow.

"Oh hell," he muttered.

He looked around the cabin of his boat. Empty. Troy and Megan must've brought her in when he passed out. He dragged himself out of bed and climbed the steps up to the deck. The weather was turning harsh and he thought about calling the dock to get his boat lifted up out of the water. Lying sideways between the dashboard and the windshield was Megan's bottle of rum, also empty.

He rolled his stiff neck and tossed the bottle idly into the water. He

sat down heavily in the captain's chair and closed his eyes.

"Hell, how much did I drink?" he said aloud.

A quiet ping opened his eyes. The G.P.S. unit was flashing on his dash. He thumbed through the coordinates they had traveled and was surprised to see that they had veered away from the course he'd remembered taking before the rum. Apparently, Troy and Megan had a destination of their own in mind when they had departed.

He clicked open his cellphone.

"Yes?" the voice asked.

"You ain't gonna believe dis," Vince said into the receiver.

Sunset Pier

Former NYPD Detective Joe Bond was on the phone with an angry Miami socialite trying to explain why her sugar daddy was sitting in the processing cell of Key West's police department. Apparently, sniffing a line of blow right in front of God and everybody at Club Opium is okay on South Beach. Things were definitely relaxed here in Key West, but you don't just do your coke on the bar at the Hog's Breath Saloon.

Joe's partner, Steve Haney, rapped lightly on the glass office door and popped his head in around it. He was a relatively new detective with just over two years of service in the Keys following his five years of uniformed service in Coconut Grove. He was a big man with a predilection for short-sleeved Tommy Bahama shirts. The only problem with being a big man was that he perspired quite readily in the island heat and his expensive silk shirts did nothing to contain the sweat... or the smell. As it was, he presently had a tiny beading of sweat under his eyes and was beginning to form a glistening sheen on his shaved bald scalp.

"You're not gonna believe this!" he mouthed silently.

Joe held up a *hang on a second* finger.

"Yes ma'am," he said into the receiver. "He will be able to post bond. Yes ma'am, you can come and get him this afternoon. I'm sorry you feel that way, ma'am."

He hung up the phone.

"Geezus, man," he shook his head at Steve, "these people think they can get away with anything."

"Dude, you gotta come check this out. You're not gonna believe what some guy fished up off of Sunset Pier."

Joe and Steve rode down to the pier in the station's newest patrol car, a fully electric Toyota Highlander. Joe hated it; he wanted to hear something when he turned the key, a rumble, a knock, a screech, anything. The electric just *booted up*.

When they reached the world famous Sunset Pier, a small crowd

had gathered... just five or six people. With the tourist evacuation, Key West had become a virtual ghost town. A crusty old fisherman was talking with two uniformed police officers. His beard was silver and scruffy; his face was leathered and gaunt.

"It's all I caught all damn day," Joe heard the old man saying.

One of the officers saw the detectives approaching and held out the man's catch of the day. Joe pulled on a surgical glove and took what simply appeared to be a small black box from the officer. A pang of excitement gripped him as he turned it over and inspected it. Though it was covered in many months' worth of ocean sludge and grime, it was obviously a broken G.P.S. device.

Joe looked at the fisherman. "Sir, we thank you for calling us about this."

"Nothin' to me," he said, "I almost threw it away; I don't want the damn thing. Can't eat it."

Steve stepped around Joe and pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. He held it out to the fisherman.

"Here ya go, Gerald."

"I don't want your damn charity," he growled.

"Gerald, take it," Steve said, shoving the money in the old man's shirt pocket. "Consider it a reward."

He grimaced but made no move to give the money back. He nodded and walked back toward the pier.

Joe shot a puzzled look at Steve. "You know that guy?"

"He's local, no place to go really," Steve said quietly. "Came down to the Keys looking for escape and all he got was the *cage-less* prison of homelessness."

"Poetic, Steve." Joe turned his attention back to the G.P.S.

He pushed the power button, and it seemed to spark to life, but just for an instant before it fizzled back into silence.

"We have to get this back to the lab," he said. "You have a bag?"

"Got one in the car."

"Okay, let's go." Joe turned to the officers. "Guys, let me know if you have any more info here, and I'll get a statement from each of you back at the office."

They both nodded and walked away. As he stepped into the cruiser, Joe radioed the station. "Jill, get me the Johnson file. I need to know if we had any details about the G.P.S. the boys had on their boat."

"Roger that."

"You think this is linked to Skipper's boys?" Steve asked as they *booted* up the electric car.

"I dunno," —Joe pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to the office— "but it's pretty coincidental if you ask me. When was the

last time someone pulled a G.P.S. unit out of the water?”

“Good point, but that was months ago.”

“Almost a year, but it’s the only link we have right now. Maybe the lab will turn something up.”



IN THE ORIGINAL FINDINGS, the investigators had discovered that Skipper Johnson’s boys, Randy and Mark, had rented the boat from a local deep sea fishing outfit. Joe made a few calls and traced the unit back to Captain Mark’s Maritime Marlin Expeditions. Captain Mark claimed that there was only one type of G.P.S. unit in all of his boats, a Northstar 952DW Chartplotter. They were top of the line and recorded up to ten of the most recent trips plotted on them. That way, they could remember and return to the best fishing grounds of the season.

Joe picked up the phone and dialed the lab. Lisa Carlson, the FSU lab intern, answered the phone.

“Whadda ya got for me?” Joe asked her.

It had only been a couple of hours, but Lisa had turned out to be a whiz with such things and produced results in a flash.

“I was able to salvage the hard drive. It seems to be dry and in working order. I would guess that we can put it into a new unit and it should work just fine.”

“Nice,” Joe said. “I’ll get Steve to run down to the marina and pick one up from Captain Mark.”

“Who’s Captain Mark?” Lisa asked.

“Just a boat owner who might belong to this unit. Got anything else?”

“Well, I did find a partial print on one of the batteries inside, but it probably just belongs to Captain Mark,” she said. “I’m checking against the C.I.A. and local databases to see if we can get a match.”

“Excellent,” Joe said. “Let me know when you have anything else.”

“Will do.”

He clicked the receiver button once to hang up with Lisa and dialed Steve’s extension.

“Yello?”

“Steve, I need you to go down and talk to Captain Mark. We need to borrow one of his Northstars.”

Black Depth

George Wyatt sat on the southeast corner of the waterline

catwalk of his oil rig, *Wyatt 1*. The walk down the hundred-plus stairs had taken just long enough that his coffee had cooled to a drinkable level. He had taken off his shoes to let his feet dangle in the warm waters of the gulf.

The full moon reflected off the unusually calm surface of the Gulf of Mexico. *The calm before the storm*, he thought, both literally and figuratively. The only sound he could hear was the lap of waves against the massive pylons supporting the superstructure. Even the late-night radios of the skeleton crew had been silenced as they drifted off to sleep several stories above. Wyatt was utterly alone.

Unable to sleep, he could barely drink his coffee his stomach was that knotted. Despite having made this rendezvous several times before, it had never gotten any easier, or any more palatable. He thought of unknown kids in the projects of Houston and Dallas and Fort Worth and Baton Rouge and New Orleans strung out on the crap that was about to pass through his rig. He thought of promising young men dying in a hail of gunfire over a few ounces of the drugs that were about to be on the *Wyatt 1*. He thought of mothers abandoning their children so they could get their next dose of the poison that was about to pass through his hands. *His hands*.

Why did he always have to help move it? Why did he always have to touch it? It would be easier to stomach if he didn't have to actually touch it; if he was never personally responsible for moving anything even one inch. He suddenly had the urge to wash his hands.

Just a few inches below him was the surface of the water. It might as well have been the top of a mountain. Wyatt was sitting a mile above the next solid surface. Beyond that black barrier laid the last frontier: the unknown, the undiscovered. Sure, he had seen it on sonar readings from a hundred feet above the waterline, but sitting here on the edge made it seem much larger, much bigger, much more overwhelming.

He toyed with the idea of jumping in; of feeling the warm water engulf him and hold him and try to keep him forever, the way it kept so many other things forever. He would have no more stress, no more fear, no more worry. And no more guilt. It would be just him and the deep blue sea until the last breath left his lungs and he followed his drill shaft to the bottom, a drill shaft that to this day had remained as dry as the Sahara, as dry as his bank accounts were becoming. Maybe in his last moments of consciousness, he would get to see for himself what he had seen only on a computer screen.

The faint sound of a twin-turbo propeller speedboat in the distance caught his attention. He sat and listened as the sound grew louder and louder. When it sounded near enough, he produced the high-intensity LED light from his pocket and began to flash it in the appropriate pattern. He heard the sound of the engines change and he knew the boat's pilot had seen the signal. He wiped away the tears he hadn't realized had crept into his eyes.

Within minutes, Hector Martinez was slowly moving his boat into position between the pylons. He was careful to keep all lights off, save for a dim few that wouldn't be visible from a distance.

"Señor Wyatt, cómo estás, mi amigo?" Hector said with a grin.

"Hello Hector." Wyatt was beyond feigning any pleasure at seeing him.

"I did not think I would beat the hurricane this week, no?"

"You did, though. How much do you have this week?"

"Two hundred kilos, give or take a few." Saying *give or take a few* was Hector's way of offering to *lose* a kilo or two to Wyatt. For a price, of course.

For a split second, George Wyatt wavered at the possibility. Damn, the money would really help. If he wasn't up to his ass in this deal with the government, he might be swayed. Suddenly, it registered how much Hector had said he was delivering.

"Two hundred kilos? Where the hell am I supposed to hide more than four hundred pounds of cocaine until the pickup? You never said it would be that much."

"And I never said it wouldn't, Señor Wyatt," Hector said in a quiet, serious tone. "Are you rejecting the delivery?" Hector placed his right hand flat on the front of his shirt, just above the beltline. Wyatt knew there was probably a gun underneath.

Wyatt also knew Hector was all business now. *Rejecting the delivery* was as close to *legalese* as this illegal business got. If Wyatt said yes, there would be immediate repercussions from all fronts, assuming Hector didn't just shoot him out of principle. All anyone would find would be a few drops of blood on the catwalk, if that.

"No Hector, I'm just saying—"

“Good. Now, we get this unloaded.”

On the storage deck of the *Wyatt 1*, George Wyatt and Hector Martinez carried the last of the cocaine from the freight elevator to a never-used closet in the corner of a never-used room. He replaced the dusty boxes that had been stacked there in such a way that no one would see anything unless they really went prowling around. It was bad enough to move it, but this time Wyatt had to store the stuff, perhaps for days or more. *This deal just keeps getting worse*, he thought.

“Where is Stingray?” Hector asked.

Stingray was the name of the contact that usually showed up the same time as Hector to make the exchange. *Fitting*, Wyatt thought, since Stingrays are poisonous.

“Beats me. All I know is that your other pickup is delayed. Stingray is delayed, and I’m supposed to store this shit until God-knows-when. They don’t tell me anything else. I don’t know when my rig became everyone’s freakin’ illegal trading post!” Wyatt realized his voice had grown almost to a scream by the end of the sentence.

Hector remained silent. He waited for the oil rig financier to calm down. “Sounds like they tell you even less than they tell me,” Hector said with a lopsided grin.

Back down at the waterline, it was time to finish business and send Hector on his way. He had already been here a good ten times longer than he usually was, and that was about nine times longer than Wyatt could tolerate him.

“This is for you,” Hector said, turning to Wyatt with a large, locked, nondescript briefcase. “Two thousand per kilo, yes?”

“That’s the deal.” Wyatt said, taking the briefcase. He knew the briefcase contained nothing but one hundred dollar bills, bound in ten thousand dollar stacks.

“And this is for Stingray,” Hector said, handing Wyatt a stack of sealed DVDs, each one with a sequential date from the last week written on the face.

Wyatt slid the DVDs into the briefcase. It was as if a great weight was lifted from his shoulders. He knew the payment for this trade would be coming and he could keep the rig running for at least one more month.

“And when she arrives,” Hector added as he stepped into the boat and started the ignition sequence, “tell her that Hector says *hello* and that my sister had her baby.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt said, waving Hector goodbye not a moment too soon. *Funny*, he thought, that issues like family and children still pervade this business, where it seems like all morality has long since vanished. He again wondered about his own morality. *We each of us have our price*, he thought.

Two days later, Wyatt found himself sitting on the same catwalk with the same flashlight drinking coffee from the same mug. Only yesterday, he had finally met Hector's drug-running guy and had to help him load the cocaine into his shrimping boat for the ride to dry American soil. Dammit, he'd had to help carry it to the boat again. *What the hell was that all about?* He idly thought to himself that it was just a way of getting blood on his hands too.

The rough, utilitarian growl of Stingray's boat was unmistakable in the distance. Coast Guard boats always sounded that way. The shady government contact called Stingray deftly maneuvered the boat between the pylons and tied it to the catwalk. The engines kept running, and no one came off the boat.

"Sorry I'm late. Something came up. A surprise development sort of thing," echoed the voice from the boat.

She always wore a black hoody with a red bandana tied around her face. Only her eyes showed in the narrow slit. Secrecy. Always. He didn't know who she was and he liked it that way; one more level of self-preservation in the plausible deniability.

"That's fine," Wyatt said. He handed over the stack of DVDs, along with a portable hard drive bearing the unmistakable logo of Wyatt Oil Company. "These are for you."

The DVDs he supposed were some classified info from a deep cover contact in Cuba, and the portable hard drive a detailed analysis of a particular set of coordinates Stingray had given him. He'd taken the time, as he usually did, to copy the DVDs to his rig's computer... as a precaution. If anything ever went down, he'd at least have some bargaining chips.

"Wonderful," came the response. "I'll be sure and send another memo to my friend at the IRS. Keep this up and they will owe *you* money."

Wyatt forced a chuckle though he didn't feel like laughing. He wouldn't be in this damn below-board business if it weren't for the IRS, the same IRS that would never see a dime of the money he was getting from Hector Martinez. He was a sliver away from shutting down the rig until Stingray had come along with this undercover deal. It still made him sick to his stomach that he was involved in this, but if it bought him more time to strike oil, he might be able to do away with all this crap. All this cloak and dagger certainly didn't make him feel at all like James Bond.

"Are you getting ready for Daniel?"

"Eh, I think it's going to pass east of us, and bang up around Destin."

"Perhaps. Be careful, though, we have a lot riding on this rig."

"Obviously," Wyatt said, glancing at the portable hard drive.

“See you next week, assuming you’re still here?”

“Of course. What choice do I have?”

“Not much, Mr. Wyatt, not much at all.”

He stood drinking his now cold coffee as the grumbling boat disappeared into the night.

He looked down at the water again and back at the long flight of stairs leading up to the *Wyatt 1*. He looked back at the water. And then back to the stairs. And then back to the water.

With a sigh, he took a deep breath and put his foot on the first step back toward the top.

Fanning Detritus

Ryan Bodean, or R.B. to his friends, was washing Gidget, the

Tortuga Adventures seaplane, when he saw the green Honda pull into the parking lot.

Seaplane was actually a misnomer. Gidget wasn't the kind of behemoth whose belly sat in the water like Howard Hughes' Spruce Goose. She was actually a Cessna Caravan with the landing gear replaced by pontoons. Much to R.B.'s annoyance, Troy said it looked like a Ford Expedition with huge tires and a lift kit... with one engine... one *big ass* engine.

She was sparkling white (when Troy remembered to wash her) with a broad orange stripe from nose to tail and a bright yellow cowl. Gidget was a beautiful plane.

As Troy exited the car, R.B. immediately knew something was up by the ear-to-ear grin he was sporting.

"Oh God," he said as he rolled his eyes, "what is it this time?"

"I found it," Troy said.

R.B. stepped down from the ladder he had propped up next to the plane. He wiped his hands on his blue coveralls and held one out to the girl who had stepped out of the passenger seat.

"Hi, I'm Ryan," he said, smiling, "but you can call me R.B."

"Pleasure to meet you, R.B." She returned his smile. "I'm Megan."

"Likewise."

Troy put his hand on R.B.'s shoulder. "It's out there; we found the wreck. She saw it with her own eyes."

"Well, I saw *something*," Megan chimed in.

Troy led them into the *Tortuga Adventures* sales trailer. He pointed roughly to the site of the wreck on the map hanging on the wall. "It's just off the coral reef, here."

R.B. nodded. "Okay, so... now what?"

Megan leaned forward. "We need to go back. We need to dive the site again with a proper boat and a team we can trust."

"What kind of boat are we talking about here?"

“Well, something with a large platform deck and maybe a crane or heavy winch of some kind,” she said.

R.B. scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment. “We’re gonna need clearance for this kind of thing. The feds are gonna want to know everything about what you’re doing out there.”

“Can’t do that,” Troy said with a shake of his head, “not just yet anyway. Somehow, we have to get around that... at least for the first dive. I want to lay claim to this before anyone else knows it’s there.”

“Well, that’s the real trick, isn’t it?” R.B. picked up the ancient looking rotary dial phone on the desk. He rolled off a quick series of numbers and waited until the man answered. “George, old buddy, old pal,” —he winked at Troy and Megan— “whaddaya know? How’s the oil diggin’ business going?”

Megan motioned to the crumpled remains of the data recorder from the magnetometer. “Now, about that computer?”

“Sure, in my office.” Troy led her into the back office of the sales trailer.

She wasn’t too surprised to see random stacks of paper, half-empty beer bottles and crumpled candy bar wrappers strewn about his desk. He opened the semi-rusted filing cabinet behind him and pulled out a relatively new looking laptop.

Seeing her obvious surprise at his computer, Troy winked. “Won it in a card game.”

“Ahhh,” Megan said, nodding, “of course.”

She booted up the computer and waited for a moment. She unwound a USB cable and connected the two devices, then opened a browser and downloaded a program from the dolphin center’s website.

“You mind?” she asked.

“Not at all.” Troy looked at her blankly.

When the load was finished she double clicked and waited for the installer to complete the magnetometer program. Idly, she began cleaning his desk. She shuffled some papers into stacks and clinked a few beer bottles into the trash can beside his desk. As she did, she noticed a few more beer bottles rolling around under her chair. She opened a manila folder and began filing some of the papers into a somewhat ordered system. She found more beer bottles stuffed into the back of his file drawer.

She held one up and rolled her eyes at Troy.

“You really shouldn’t drink so much, you know,” she said, only half joking.

Troy shrugged his shoulders and flopped down onto the mid-eighties, deco-design recliner sofa with cup holders that he’d rescued from a nearby dumpster.

“I’m a pirate,” he said, “and pirates drink.”

She dunked the bottle into the trash. “Yeah, and the average life expectancy of a pirate was about thirty-five, which puts you well beyond your golden years, Mr. Bodean.”

“Look, I don’t really drink that much,” he protested weakly, “I just have a sip now and again to take the edge off.”

She opened the other file drawer and pulled out a half empty bottle of tequila. Shooting him a more serious look, she plopped it into his trash can as well.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa now,” he said and jumped up from the couch.

He pulled the bottle from the trash and shook it around.

“You can’t just toss Jose out like that,” he said through a grin, but it slowly dissipated when he realized she wasn’t joking.

With a great struggle, he let the bottle fall heavily back into the can.

She smiled and looked back at the computer screen.

The charting program had pulled up a graph-like grid and had begun to plot points out in what appeared to be a completely random order. To Troy, it looked like a seismograph gone haywire.

As the screen began to fill with more and more points, Megan’s jaw dropped slightly and then continued to drop even more.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

Troy looked at her and then back to the screen. “What? What is it?” He gazed at the computer, clearly puzzled.

“It’s everywhere,” she said, pointing at the screen.

“What do you mean?”

“Look,” she said, and traced her finger from dot to dot, “each one of these is a hit.”

He grabbed her arm and gently shook her.

“A hit? What does that mean? English please.”

She snapped out of it a bit. “A hit means we found something; something that doesn’t belong on the ocean floor. It’s even more than I originally thought.”

Troy looked back at the darkening cluster of dots. There had to be over a hundred now. It dawned on him what he was looking at... the fan-shaped scattered remains of a shipwreck.

Suddenly R.B. jerked open Troy’s office door. “C’mon let’s fire up Gidget.”

“Why, what’s up? Where’re we going?” Troy asked.

“We gotta go see a man about a boat.”

Natasha Wainwright sipped a cup of steaming hot Cuban coffee

and tapped out a few notes on her laptop. The clicking of the keys echoed softly down the halls of historic Fort Jefferson, her current assigned location.

The weather had been getting rougher the last few days and the tourist flights had all been cancelled, so she had a lot of free time to catch up on her real mission.

For all anyone else knew, she was a new park ranger stationed in Key West, but in reality, she was under cover for the C.I.A. Two weeks prior to her assignment here, a classified unmanned recon drone had gone down in the Gulf of Mexico. It was being sent on test missions over Cuba and a glitch or something in its computer systems had flown it straight down into the water. If the plane survived the impact, the data on board wouldn't be serious enough to warrant a national security emergency, but tensions with the new Cuban regime would escalate exponentially.

In a rush, her boss at the agency had pulled some strings and placed her at the island fort to begin the staging process for recovering the spy plane. So far, she'd been unable to locate the crash site; she thought it ironic that a reconnaissance plane hadn't been fitted with a locator beacon.

She'd been studying the maps and ocean current forecasts and had come up with about a square mile area she felt pretty sure would turn up the sunken plane. Unfortunately, that was still like trying to find a needle in a haystack the size of a football field, with the added bonus of the needle moving around with the currents every day.

Natasha stood up from the desk and walked over to a nearby window. The lightest mist of rain was dripping down the glass. Three days. That was her best guess as to how long she had to recover the plane before the hurricane hit.

She felt pretty confident she could find and raise the plane, or worst-case scenario, destroy it. Just recently, she discovered that her

old *friend* Troy Bodean had been flying around a lot out there. Rumor had it that he'd found something... something he thought was an old shipwreck from the sixteen hundreds.

She glanced back at her desk to the silver aluminum briefcase next to the computer and wondered how much it would take to buy off Troy, or better yet, hire him to help. The second offer would be harder for him to swallow, as he would have to relocate and most likely would be under government surveillance for several years afterward. But he wasn't exactly raking in the dough with his crappy little tourist flights.

It hadn't taken them very long to grow apart after her transfer. They rarely if ever communicated, and even then it was short, one line e-mails. She had learned later that a completely random I.E.D. explosion had ruined his knee back in Afghanistan, ending his military career as an Apache pilot.

She did feel a little pity for him and thought she'd offer to buy his help with the wreck first. If that didn't succeed the options grew very slim, but she had a job to do and she would do it... no matter what it cost. The agency would show great favor for her service.

Troy had told her he was flying today, but she supposed the coming weather would keep him grounded. She pulled her radio from her belt.

"James, is the boat still in the water?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so... why?"

"Thought I might make a quick trip into the gulf."

"Okay, sure. Where are we going?"

Oops. She didn't mean to make it an invite. "Oh, well, I figured I'd get some more readings for the weather service... you don't have to go if you don't want."

"Nah, it's cool. I got nothin' better to do."

Damn, she thought. She'd been hoping he'd be too happy getting stoned to want to go with her. She walked over to her desk and opened the center drawer. She pulled out a small black bottle and removed a little green pill. Carefully, she slipped the pill into her shirt pocket and replaced the bottle.

"How 'bout a quick shot of that Patron before we head out?" she said into the radio.

"I'll have it cooled before you get down here."

She closed her laptop and poured the rest of her Cuban coffee down the drain. *Damn*, that stuff was strong. She unlocked and opened her footlocker and took out a large black duffle bag, shouldered it, relocked the box and headed for the door.

Her cellphone beeped.

-REPORT

Ugh, God. Now was *not* a good time. She clicked it open and tapped out a quick message.

-Checking site number one today. Have info and possible first contact with stingray.

Stingray was the codename for the downed drone plane. She liked the name and had used it as her own codename recently.

-What is status on the Cuban?

Dammit, she didn't have time for this. She considered Hector Martinez as an annoying divergence from her real mission. She glanced over at the stack of DVDs on her desk next to her laptop. They were still unopened.

-Have made contact. Researching obtained materials now. Will report ASAP.

What the hell the US government was doing still watching Cuba was beyond her.

-Will expect your report on both situations at 0700.

She flipped her phone closed and quickly reopened it.

-Coming to the island today, would like to get together for lunch.

She hoped Troy would agree so she could get him out of the picture quickly. Three days wasn't much time for this sort of thing.

-Sorry, busy today, how's tomorrow?

Dammit, this was becoming much harder than she wanted.

-Ok, tomorrow. I'll call you.

-You bet.

She closed the phone and once again hefted the duffle bag over her shoulder. As she approached James' room, she could already hear the blaring of steel drum music and his screechy voice wailing above Bob Marley's.

Good, he'd already started without her. She slid her bag off to the side before she entered and jerked open his door.

"Sorry I'm late!"

"Heyyyyy, where ya been?" he drawled, with his Patron tequila bottle in one hand and a shot glass in the other.

Several shots and one tiny green pill later, he was lying face down on the ground, out like a light. God, she wished everything was as easy as incapacitating this guy.

She turned to the door and heard her cellphone beep again.

"Crap, not again," she muttered and yanked the phone from her pocket.

She opened it, but there was no message. She heard the beep again. It wasn't her phone. The beep was coming from James' pocket. Not a big deal; she was sure he had the same Government Issue sat phone.

She walked toward the door, but something made her pause. She

turned back toward him. With a heave, she rolled him over and reached into his pocket. He groaned, but did not wake up; the green pill would have him out until morning.

She pulled out his phone and clicked it open. What she saw on the screen sent a chill up her spine. In digital green and gray she read the newest text message.

-REPORT

Location, Location, Location

Steve Haney handed his partner the Northstar 952DW

Chartplotter. "He wasn't very happy about giving that thing up."

"Yeah, well, that's just too bad, isn't it?" Joe Bond replied as he took the black box. "Let's get down to the lab and get that old data card put into this thing." He picked up his file and the G.P.S. unit and led Steve down the hall to the crime lab. "Maybe I can finally tell Skipper what happened to his boys."

"Ha, and maybe he'll stop calling every day," Steve said and chuckled.

"Not likely."

Lisa Carlson, the FSU crime lab intern, was predictably hunched over a microscope as they entered through two stainless steel swinging doors. A cute girl, with strawberry blonde hair and freckles on her nose, she was peering through oversized brown-framed glasses. She had her hair pulled into a loose ponytail and under her lab coat she wore a shirt that said, *Chemists do it Periodically on a Table*.

She looked up and smiled. "Well, there's good news and bad news... which do you want first?"

Joe shrugged. "Let's have the bad news."

She stood up and walked over to a flat screen monitor sitting on a countertop that was carefully and meticulously littered with evidence envelopes and slides of at least a dozen current investigations. She clicked her mouse and a grainy picture of a lifted fingerprint appeared on the screen.

"Apparently there wasn't enough of a print here to match to anyone in the local database," she said, and enlarged the print and circled three separate points with her cursor, "but with these particular areas we were able to exclude Captain Mark and both of the Johnson boys."

Joe figured they must've appeared puzzled because she continued as if speaking to a third grader.

"Which means this print belongs to someone else."

“Okay, sure, got that much,” Joe said, “but whose is it?”

“I sent the print to the C.I.A. and we’ll have something by tonight... *if* the print is in their database and *if* it’s complete enough to find a match.”

Steve had picked up and was peering at a spent bullet in a tiny Ziploc bag. “And the good news?” he asked.

Lisa snatched the bag from his fingers and placed it carefully back into its place on the countertop. “The good news,” she said, giving him a reprimanding look, “is that this still works as far as I can tell.”

She tapped a cardboard box on the counter and handed both Joe and Steve a pair of latex surgical gloves. “Put these on.”

As they pulled on their gloves, she opened the box and removed the newly discovered G.P.S. unit. She placed it on the counter and plugged it into a generic four-pronged power source.

“I opened it up and dried out the inside as well as I could, and it really wasn’t as bad as I thought,” she said. “I guess it is supposed to be water resistant to a certain degree. The manufacturer just didn’t expect it to stand up to complete underwater submersion.”

She pushed the power button and the screen blinked to life. A small readout slowly came into focus and a flashing dot appeared on a latitude and longitude grid, the bottom information line of which read *24.57 LAT by 81.68 LON*, their current location. Suddenly, the screen shut off.

“Oh, and I forgot about *that* bad news,” she said somewhat smugly. “It only stays on for about ten seconds.”

“Nice!” Steve added sarcastically.

“It’s okay,” Joe said. “Think this might help?” he asked, and handed her the newly confiscated Northstar unit from Captain Mark’s fleet.

“Ahh, yes, that should do the trick.” She took the G.P.S. machine and quickly began disassembling it. “Gimme fifteen and I’ll have her up and running.”

Joe winked at her and patted Steve’s belly. “Tell you what, we’ll grab a quick bite and be back in an hour.”

“Mm hmm.” She was already engrossed in disconnecting and reconnecting internal wires and cards in the two units.

Ten minutes later, Steve was unsuccessfully wiping buffalo wing sauce from his face at the world-famous Hog’s Breath Saloon.

“You know what I just don’t get?” he said in between chewing and twisting and chewing a wing, “is why kill two boys, steal a G.P.S. unit, and then dump it into the ocean? I just don’t see the logic there.”

“Yeah, I know,” Joe said, and scratched his chin. “What’s on a G.P.S. unit that warrants a double homicide?”

“Treasure. Didn’t the report say that the boys had been bragging

about finding something out there?"

"Still, no need to kill them, just steal the G.P.S. from their boat and go get it while they partied," Joe said.

"Yeah." Steve began chewing again.

They both sat in silence for a few minutes, trying to piece together the fragments of this strange case.

"Someone wanted that location evidence gone and no witnesses alive who could find it again," Joe muttered. "It reeks of a cover-up."

"Not a very good one though," Steve said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, if you're gonna sink the G.P.S.," —he took a loud slurp of his diet soda— "why not sink the whole boat?"

"Good question... maybe the killer got caught in the act and had to cut and run?"

"I think the guy got what he wanted and didn't really care about the rest. It's like you said, he just got rid of anything that pointed to that particular location."

"So, what the hell is out there?" Joe signaled the waitress for their check.

The attractive yet road-worn looking young girl came to their table. Joe thought she looked like Daisy Duke on crack.

"How you boys doin'?"

Steve put his arm around her waist. "Hey, Leela," —he winked at Joe— "you gonna be in the homemade bikini contest tonight?"

"Nah, they cancelled it," she said with an added shrug. "Guess with that damn storm comin', ain't nobody here to see it."

"Awww, that's too bad, huh Joe?"

"Yeah," he said and rolled his eyes, gave her a twenty and stood up. "Let's go."

"Maybe next time, sweetie," Steve said, and squeezed her as he got up.

"Alright, cut it out, you're on duty." Joe grabbed him and ushered him toward the door.

"Just playin' around." Steve waved back to the girl.

As they walked out to the curb of Duval Street, Joe's phone beeped.

"Oops, it's a voicemail from Lisa," —he pushed one to access the message— "I didn't even hear it ring."

"Joe, it's Lisa," she said in a very excited tone. "I have your machine working, and I've downloaded all the data of the past ten trips and made a map for you. I also got a hit on the print from the C.I.A. database." She paused for a second. "And get this... they have a record of the print..."

"She got a hit on the print," he mouthed to Steve.

“... but the profile’s status is classified. Anyway, just thought you should know. See you back at the lab.”

“Classified?”

Joe deleted the message and closed his phone. “What the hell is going on here?”

A Living Thing

Hector carefully idled his boat forward until he felt it gently slow into the emerging beach. With no lights, the hard part was knowing when to slow down. As he approached, he thought he could hear the faint sound of another boat passing in the distance, but saw nothing. He wrote it off as paranoia. The night was overcast, making it darker than usual, not to mention that Hurricane Daniel was beginning to make a rough chop of the normally stagnant water.

He stepped out onto the soft sand and pulled his boat far enough on shore to keep it from drifting away. To his right, he could see the dim figure of his contact making his way along the narrow peninsula of sand that existed only at low tide. He could see dark circles under the man's eyes; he was seriously stressed. His white t-shirt was rumpled and stained under his armpits and his gut heaved against the stretched cotton. A thin veil of sweat beaded on his cheeks. Hector had no idea who this man was or who he was working for, but he looked like he'd had a rough couple of nights.

"I hope this trip was worth it," Hector said.

"It's only ninety miles to that hellhole you call home. Here."

His contact abruptly shoved a brown paper bag into his hands. Hector could feel the distinctive shape of bundled money inside. He opened it and flipped through the stacks to ensure the amount was somewhat correct. Not once had the money been short, but old habits die hard.

"Numbers, please," demanded the man.

Hector returned to the boat, opened a small compartment under the dash, and retrieved a small note pad from inside. On the note pad were ten sets of coordinates. He didn't care what they meant or where in the gulf they were. All he knew was that this American wanted them, badly enough to share money, share information, and tell him to use any means necessary to get them. He ripped the sheet of paper out of the pad and handed it over.

"Are you sure these are correct? Are you absolutely sure?" the man

demanded again.

"Yes, yes. I checked them twice," Hector assured him.

"Where's the unit now?"

"Somewhere down there with the fishes, I think," the Cuban said with a toothy grin.

He neglected to tell his contact that he had forgotten to pull the data cards out until the moment he watched the G.P.S. unit sink into the blue. No worries, it wouldn't matter at the bottom of the gulf. He didn't like the tone this gringo was beginning to use, though, and he could feel his face reddening.

"Does anyone else know anything about this?"

"No, no, señor," Hector said and shook his head, "nobody saw nothing and nobody knows nothing."

Hector had been surprised to have recently stumbled onto three money making schemes in the gulf; one obtaining these numbers for his mysterious friend, one ferreting classified information out of Cuba for Stingray, and the third running his shipments of coke through the oil rig that Stingray had chosen for their meetings—with the help of her government friends on patrol in the gulf looking the other way. He had no idea they were related in any way. He was glad his business was over with this guy. He didn't really like him, but tonight's trade would be their last meeting. *Adios Hibrido*, he thought.

"You could have been more discreet in getting these numbers, you know. We didn't discuss your methods because I didn't think we needed to. You went too far."

The man was now speaking down to him like he was a child.

"I did what I was hired to do. Don't worry about the details," Hector said, his tone cold and unapologetic.

In his line of work, he often found customers to be lacking the backbone or stomach for the less palatable parts of the jobs. These American types were some of the worst. They always thought their money would insulate them from feeling any guilt, but it never did.

"You Americans are such hypocrites. You hate us for selling drugs, but you buy all we have. You want information, but you don't want to do what's necessary to get it. You want to have it all effortlessly. Now, your hands are dirty too. You are one of us."

"I think not."

"*Me emputa sa vaina!* You think just because you pay someone to do your dirty work leaves you clean? The *jefe* is as guilty as the worker. You told me to do what was necessary, now you want to whine about it after you get what you wanted."

"Murder of innocents was never part of the deal. You left a trail, a trail that cannot lead to us."

"You came to me *because* of my reputation, not *despite* it. Whatever

you think of me, look in the mirror.”

“You have no idea who you are talking to. Never mention those boys again, either. Ever. This ends here, you idiot. Do you understand? We’re done. Over. *Fin*. Get on your little boat and get your ass back to Cuba. If I ever see you again, I’ll make what you did to the Johnson boys look like a ride at Disneyworld.”

“You don’t give me orders, *puto*!” Hector placed his hand flat on the front of his shirt.

He didn’t feel threatened, but he did have a reputation and he had to uphold it. He knew this gesture was an obvious show that he had a gun tucked in his belt, and while he had never tried it with this guy, he seemed like he’d be easy to push around. Much to his surprise, his contact stepped three paces *toward* him. He didn’t even put his arms up. This guy was clenching his teeth, and he looked pissed.

“Now you look here, muchacho, I’ve had AK-47s put to my head by teenage freedom fighters in countries you’ve never heard of, on missions that never existed. Do you think I’m afraid of getting greased by a monkey like you?”

Oh, this one has an attitude, Hector thought. Some people do, until they see the gun. Hector reached under his shirt and retrieved his stainless steel 9mm semiautomatic and pointed it straight at the man, only three feet away, his arm fully extended.

“You *should* be afraid, gringo. I’m a bad man.”

Hector saw his contact twitch and heard a metallic *thwwwp* sound. In the blink of an eye, a blow to the top of Hector’s hand just behind the thumb dislodged the weapon. He pulled his clenched fist to his chest in agonizing pain. A second later the cold and unmistakably hard steel of a retractable ASP baton struck Hector in the right side of the head and put him to the ground, as he tried to comfort his bruised skull with his bruised hand. Another blow to his head and a firm push on his shoulder left him flat on his back, stunned, and still looking up at the dark sky. He felt the baton, now slick with his own blood, lay across this throat, with his contact’s foot slowly increasing the pressure on his larynx.

The man leaned over him, his silhouette eclipsing the moon. “Just who the hell do you think you are?” he snarled. “You think you can come here and threaten me? How many sleaze-balls do you think I’ve sunk to the bottom of the gulf? I lost count years ago. I was killing for my people when you were still sucking your thumb.”

Hector felt his windpipe contract under the baton. He wouldn’t last much longer. He couldn’t take a breath and could feel his face swelling.

“I don’t even need permission to take you out. You’re a freebie. You’re a target of opportunity. I can kill you right now and justify it

later, if I even bother to mention it to anyone.”

He released his weight from Hector's throat.

Hector sat up, gasped for air, and rested his weight on his one good hand. Then he heard a familiar sound: the unmistakable click of a hammer being pulled back on a gun—his gun—just as he felt the barrel against the bottom of his chin.

“Threaten me again. I dare you. I know people who can make you wish you had never been born, and I’ll be happy to deliver you to that hell.”

Hector could smell alcohol on the man’s breath and his eyes had a crazy glint to them. *Este hombre esta loco*, Hector thought. There was a fully automatic AR-15 in the boat, but this guy would blow his chin off if he even twitched; he wasn't afraid to pull a trigger, Hector guessed. He put his hands up in surrender.

“Okay, okay, man,” he rasped as the pressure released on his throat. “I’m just gonna go. You will never see me again.”

He staggered to his feet. The contact remained still, gun and baton in hand. Hector massaged his throat and backed up a step. He reached down to pick up his package of money from the sand.

“Well, I suppose this won’t be such a problem for you when the Hurricane comes, eh señor?”

The man remained silent as he watched the Cuban turn and limp to his boat.

“You know, whatever you're looking for out there, you won't find it,” Hector said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you won’t. You are treating the gulf like it’s only water. It is so much more than that.”

Hector stood next to the boat, ankle deep in the Gulf. He pointed out into the darkness.

“It is a living thing. It moves, it breathes, it pushes underwater mountains around with no more effort than you would sweep your floor. If it doesn’t want you to find something, you won't. And it is apparent that it doesn’t want this thing found.”

Hector’s contact broke into a full laugh. “Found? Found? What makes you think we want it *found*?”

A Man About A Crane

R.B. flew Gidget like he was an old pro at the stick though he'd

only owned her for a little over five years. The seaplane hadn't been named Gidget when he bought her from crazy old Mel. No, that had been Troy's doing. Something about a girl he used to know back at the Peppermint Hippo in Vegas.

After the war, R.B. had come back to an empty home, parents both passed, Troy allegedly killed by an I.E.D., and no work to speak of... so, he did what every estranged vet does; he rambled on. He rambled so far that he ended up at the southernmost point of the continental United States of America, Key West. He poked around from odd job to odd job until one night at Pepe's. He was at the bar talking to one of the local loonies, Mel, about his huge ship captain's license. He and Mel spent the evening trying to one-up each other with stories from their military pasts, ranging from Mel's exploits on the Zambezi river with local rebels trying to board his oil barge, to R.B.'s daring rescue of a group of ex-pat hikers who'd gotten overturned and stranded trying to get their dugout canoe up to the base of the churning Angel Falls.

Eventually, Mel told him about his seaplane and a failed attempt at a tourist sight-seeing venture. He never understood why it hadn't taken off, but R.B. thought it might've been the proprietor's... craziness, that kept the customers away.

He knew of a perfect place to put the plane back to work. Fort Jefferson. The trip to the island fort would be so much more exciting with an aerial view and a water landing. Without letting Mel see his excitement, he talked the old man into letting it go for a pittance. Money R.B. had borrowed from his grandmother covered most of it while a small business loan covered the rest. All of that had been paid for many times over. And now, after his second pilot had run off with a Red Garter girl from Duval Street, he'd discovered that his brother—who flew Apaches in the war in Afghanistan—was alive and well. A little internet digging and a phone call and he and his brother were

united again.

He didn't have as much flying experience as Troy, but he had learned to land her in the narrowest of shallow channels, where a drift ten feet in any direction could mean hooking the coral with a float and flipping the plane over on its top, ruining every electronic system on board, plus the engine, and dumping four hundred pounds of fuel into the water; and that's the best-case crash scenario, with no tourists on board to perish in the attempt.

Compared to that, landing in the deep water of the gulf a hundred yards away from the *Wyatt 1* was a task he could have done in his sleep. He took the landing a little hot in order to impress Megan Simons, the cute marine biologist Troy had roped into his treasure hunting scheme.

The oil rig wasn't wide enough to accommodate the wings of the Cessna Caravan between its lower pylons, so R.B. slowly taxied the plane up to the outside corner of the waterline catwalk while Troy jumped over with a guide line and a small boardwalk they kept handy for just such occasions. By the time they were secured, George Wyatt was standing on the catwalk.

"Well, well, look what the tide's brought in," he said and extended his hand to Troy. "Long time no see, buddy. Bill said you'd be here today. How was your flight?"

"It's getting a little rough out there, with the weather and all, but it's still okay," Troy said as he shook the brawny man's hand.

"Yeah, probably not long before you'll have to pull her out for good. Did you bring enough fuel to get you home this time?" He joked, referring to Troy's ill-fated trip out here when he lost an old bar bet and had to fly Wyatt and the crew back to the rig, subsequently running out of fuel and having to wait several days for a refill. Troy had always thought it ironic to be stranded on an oil rig waiting for gas.

"Hey, nobody lays down a full house!"

Wyatt laughed. "Nope, I guess not."

"What the heck are you doing here anyway?" Troy asked. "I figured you'd head inland with Bill and the guys. Weren't they headed to the Big Easy for some serious recreation?"

"Well, they were, but that blasted storm has every coastal town along the gulf battening the hatches and preparing for the worst. Seems Katrina's made 'em all gun shy."

"Can't say as I blame them. So I guess Gene's around too, eh?"

"He is, of course. He's up in the control room as always; loves all those gadgets, you know."

Megan walked up and Troy couldn't help but notice Wyatt giving her an up and down glance; appreciative, but with that look a sailor

gets in his eyes after a six-month submarine tour in the deep.

“George Wyatt, meet Megan Simons,” he said, “and of course, R.B.”

“Pleasure to meet you, miss,” he said and shook her hand before turning to Troy’s brother. “You, I’m not so sure about.” The oil rigger laughed and clapped his hand on R.B.’s shoulder. “How’s the tourist biz?”

“Can’t keep the plane in the water long enough to pick up all the people we’re carrying back and forth,” said R.B. and returned the man’s smile. “Remind me to tell you about the bachelorette party we just did over a beer sometime.”

Megan shot a glance at Troy. He opened his mouth, presumably to offer an explanation.

“I—”

“Will do,” Wyatt interrupted and pointed to the stairs. “We all ready?”

“Yup,” Troy said and jumped onto the stairs.

They made the long climb up to the conference room, which was really just a second kitchen, but with a commanding view of the gulf to the west. George poured thick black coffee into Styrofoam cups and handed them out.

“So, you guys need our crane. Fair enough. I don’t want to pester you with too many questions, but this rig and everything on it is my family fortune, so I’m going to ignore my tact and pester you with too many questions. What are you going to do with it?”

“Well, um... we...” Troy started.

No one wanted to say anything first. Wyatt crossed his arms and remained silent, leaving an awkward void.

R.B. knew the guy better than anyone else there, but it still wasn’t much. He knew the man was no angel, because he’d wiled away many hours listening to his rebel-rousing stories between shots. He wasn’t pretending to be a Boy Scout; he just wanted to make sure his machinery would be back in one piece.

“We have to recover something,” Troy finally said.

“Something?” asked Wyatt. “Define this *something*.”

“It’s big. At least, we think it *might* be big. And heavy. Tons per load, possibly, so we want to make sure we have a heavy-duty machine.”

“You can get those a few miles from where you came from. Why fly all the way out here for my crane?” Wyatt continued.

“Let’s be honest, you guys are friends and we need discretion. Anyone with a decent-sized crane will want all sorts of documentation and records before turning it over to us. They may even want to go with us. Regardless, commercial equipment companies track their

equipment's movements with LoJack systems."

"And you don't want to be tracked? You want me to give my crane to someone who doesn't want to be tracked?"

Troy considered what he was about to say carefully. "The load is somewhere we aren't supposed to be. Federal waters. Protected coral reef. No crane owner is going to send his boat in there with the risk of it being seized."

It is widely known that no oil man is an environmentalist, and Troy thought maybe the chance to defy federal environmental laws wouldn't exactly put George Wyatt off.

"Yeah, damned fish-huggers. They would wipe out humanity to protect a square mile of dying coral."

Megan shot a harsh look at Troy which he promptly ignored.

"So, you need my crane to go where you aren't supposed to be to get something you probably aren't supposed to have, and you aren't even going to tell me where, what or why?"

"Yep, that's pretty much it."

"I don't like this. Bill and Gene think I should call this off if it feels a little strange, and I gotta admit it smells pretty fishy."

"George, please, we need this."

"I don't know, Troy, I—"

"So, what's it like out here, with no women?" Megan suddenly interrupted.

"What do you mean?" The hardened oil rig boss looked like he'd been caught off guard.

Troy was surprised she'd spoken up, but then again, he had seen this ploy work for her before, so he sat back and gave her a little room.

"I mean, all you big, tough, roughneck types out here for weeks on end with no girls to keep you company. It must be hard," she said, batting her eyelashes.

Troy winced at the over-the-top flirting, but by God it seemed to be working.

"It sucks, if you ask me," Wyatt said, and chuckled. "Hell, that's why we end up at the Red Garter as much as we do, or the French Quarter, because everyone needs a little company now and again, don't they?"

It sounded as if he now saw Megan as fair game and was moving in. Little did he know that he was the prey. Troy almost felt sorry for him... almost.

"It's sort of like back at my dolphin sanctuary. It's full of free-spirited young girls and a few touchy-feely sensitive guys. Sometimes it feels like there's not a *real* man for miles. We hate it," she continued.

"What a waste. Smart, good looking girls like you shouldn't have

to search for a good time," Wyatt said and looked directly into Megan's eyes, hoping she got his not-so-subtle message.

"I agree. Listen, why don't you give us a call the next time you guys come in. Maybe we can meet you in Key West."

"But, if I don't give you this crane, you won't take my call, will you?"

Troy tried to muffle a laugh. *So George is playing the game too.*

Megan looked surprised, but quickly recovered. "Um, well, no... probably not."

"That's too bad," he said, then winked at her. "I'll get the keys."



GENE HENRY, chief drill rigger for the *Wyatt 1*, sat with his back to the door watching the dozen screens available to him. Keeping up with the drill head was his job, but the sonar readings had become his hobby, ever since he realized what they were able to do. Any large sound that penetrated the water to the hard seafloor bedrock would travel like sound through a cymbal to the ultra-sensitive sonic equipment of the *Wyatt 1*'s primary sonar shaft. Those vibrations were then digitized into distinct colors on Gene's screen.

The sound appeared differently depending on whether it had to travel through sand, coral, wood or metals before reaching bedrock. By graphically depicting the differences, Gene could *see* the outline of the sea floor in amazing detail. The only drawback was that it needed a sound source, and the strength of the sound source determined the clarity of the image. Deep water never produced a good image, just because few sounds made it down that deep, but the shallow water produced great images, assuming there was a sound source nearby.

Lightning was a good sound because it was so loud, but it was also very brief and limited to a small area. Loud boat motors were another useful source, but boats tended to follow the path of other boats, creating very good images of popular channels for tourist cruises, but little else of value outside of those. Gene had also carefully mapped the floor around Fort Jefferson, using the motors of boats and planes there. Explosions worked well, but obviously, there were very few of those out here.

Gene didn't have to sit and watch the screens; all of the sonar readings were recorded and stored on the backup drives. But he'd become addicted to the amazing things the sonar revealed about the gulf floor and enjoyed watching it live better than watching the replays later. He liked suspense. And the pending hurricane and spin-off storms would provide more sonar readings in one day than Gene had seen since the equipment was installed. He was anxious.

Bill Bane's tall, dark shape walked into the room and delivered a fresh cup of coffee. Gene took a sip and shifted his girth to look at the man.

"So, Troy and R.B. are here?" he asked Bill.

"Yup."

"And they've been talking to George?"

Bill sat down in an office chair beside him and nodded his head sipping the coffee. "Uh huh."

Gene reached up and clicked a few keys on his computer, the image on his monitor shifting to a view from under the rig. He tapped the screen with his pen.

"So, why does the security camera from below show George waving to our crane chugging away?"

"You got me. One of those favors where you don't ask too many questions."

"Fair enough. It's his boat, after all, but everything tied to this rig is our responsibility too." Gene raised a trademark eyebrow at Bane. "So why didn't they rent a crane from someone closer?"

"This one's free, I guess, or maybe they don't want a paper trail."

Gene sighed, as if he was mildly insulted by the notion. He turned in his chair, reached high on the panel in front of him, and flipped a switch that remotely engaged the tracking device aboard the *Wyatt Knot*.

"The boss may trust them, but I'm not so sure I do. Let's see where they go."

X Marks The Spot

Several hours later, Natasha Wainwright clicked through the text

messages she had uploaded from James Howard's government issued cellphone. She had gone back to her quarters in a panic. Most of the messages were typical James:

-Meet me at Fat Tuesday's

-I'll be there at 9:30

But there was one that caught her attention.

-They're getting too close. I have the location coordinates. Will keep an eye on the spot.

The number he had sent it to was a 786 area code... local. She jotted down the number on a notepad and decided she would call it from a payphone on the mainland when she got a chance.

"Who's getting too close to what?" she wondered aloud.

Closing her door, she again shouldered her duffle bag and headed quietly down to the beach. She looked back toward the fort and could see that James' light had been turned off. He'd probably stumbled to the bathroom in his delirium, his body weight allowing him to come around quicker than she expected. She'd have to be quiet. The misty rain was so warm it was almost hot and the wind was beginning to pick up as well.

"Damn hurricanes," she muttered and heaved her heavy bag into the boat.

She removed the lines and shoved the boat back into the water and jumped on as it floated out. She turned on the small trolling motor with almost no sound and idled out into the darkness without running lights. When she thought she was sufficiently far away she turned the ignition. The engine fired to life quickly, which she thought was odd; it normally took several tries to get it running. A glance at the fuel gauge told her she had barely enough to get to her possible crash site and back.

"Dammit, James," she cursed as she pulled the boat out to deeper water, "just once, fill up the boat after you take it on a joyride!"

She brought the boat up to cruising speed and flipped on her laptop. *Good thing these babies are waterproof*, she thought while wiping the hot stinging spray from her face. She tapped the coordinates she'd narrowed her search down to into her onboard G.P.S., and estimated it shouldn't take more than twenty minutes to get there; so, she throttled up to fifty and turned on the radio.

An emergency tone was blaring through the static and the weather center was calling for a total evacuation of the Keys by Thursday. It seemed that Hurricane Daniel was going to take a turn straight at the island chain. She clicked to a new station and the same alert was blaring out there too. She turned it off in disgust.

"Twenty-four hours to get this thing up," she said, laughing sarcastically. "Not a problem."

With the wind and engine noise surrounding her, she never even noticed the boat racing up behind.

NOT TEN MILES to the west of Natasha's boat, Troy cocked his straw cowboy hat back on his head and glanced down at the G.P.S. in the cockpit of the *Wyatt Knot*, the small tug they had borrowed from the *Wyatt 1*.

"Almost there," he said to R.B., who was dozing in the passenger's seat.

"Hmm, huh, what?" He rustled himself up into a sitting position.

"The shipwreck, we're about five minutes away."

"I'll go tell Megan." R.B. stood and stretched.

Troy could feel his heartbeat begin to speed up; he had been waiting for this for a long time. In just a few minutes, his whole life was going to change. For once, his fortunes appeared to be looking up.

Megan and R.B. entered the cockpit of the boat as he was slowing. Megan glanced out the misty window as if trying to recognize the spot where she had gone down. But the storm was clouding the water and visibility was reduced to about ten feet.

Troy shut down the engine and turned to face them. "This is it."

He had a grin that reminded R.B. of a long-forgotten Christmas morning and seeing the pile of packages and gifts for the first time.

"Well, don't just stand there, let's get in the water!" Troy jumped up and turned them both toward the cabin door. "R.B. and I will go down and you can operate the crane."

"I'm not afraid to get in the water," she retorted and put her hands defiantly on her hips, "and besides, I'm the one who'll make sure we do this correctly and protect the reef around this thing." She crossed her arms and tapped a foot impatiently.

"I know, I know, you want to protect the environment and all that jazz, but we need someone smart up here to operate the machinery,"

—he winked at her— “and that puts us right out.”

“Hey!” R.B. chimed in.

“Just messin’ with ya, bro.” Troy nearly shoved them out onto the deck. “Now let’s get this party started, because the hard rain will be on us soon.”

He turned to Megan. “I promise we’ll make sure we disturb as little as possible getting’ this thing up.”

She didn’t look like she was going to give in, but finally relented as Troy squeezed into a wetsuit.

“Hold on to my hat, would ya?”

She took the Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat from him and slipped it on her head. Troy raised an eyebrow, and she winked.

“You might look better in that than I do,” he said, laughing.

“Okay, you two can work out who gets the hat after we get back,” R.B. said, bringing them out of the moment. “Can we do this now?”

They worked out a rope tug signal for lifting their findings from the bottom as R.B. also squeezed into his wetsuit. Megan took a cursory glance at the crane operation panel. It seemed pretty intuitive; the crane controls were labeled simply; *UP*, *DOWN*, and *ROTATE*. Another lever operated the cabled hook and it also read *UP* and *DOWN*.

“I think I can handle this,” she said as they began rigging up a wire mesh box on the end of the hook.

“I knew you could, sweetie.” Troy clapped his hand on her shoulder and winked again.

“Let’s go.” R.B. was tugging at his slightly too small wetsuit. “I feel like a sardine in this thing!”

They shouldered their air tanks and pulled their masks on. Troy took a few breaths from the regulator and gave the thumbs up. R.B. did the same and they both turned to the water.

As they resurfaced Megan slowly lifted the cage from the deck and lowered it in beside them. A few seconds later they were down too far to see beneath the choppy surface, so Megan relaxed and waited.

The wind began to gust harshly at times and the rain became steadier and soaking, so she ran into the cabin to grab a poncho, and by the time she was back they were already tugging the rope.



NATASHA WAINWRIGHT HAD IMMEDIATELY STOPPED when she saw the other boat on the horizon. She grabbed her binoculars and peered into the distance.

The back end of the boat said *Wy Knott*.

“What the hell is George doing out here?”

A figure emerged from the cabin of the boat, but whoever it might be was wrapped and concealed in a bright orange poncho. The figure moved toward the large crane on the boat and began pushing buttons and levers on the control panel. Natasha decided to wait and see what they brought up. She caught herself holding her breath. She wiped the rain away from the binoculars and looked again.

A basket of some sort rose out of the water and two divers surfaced shortly behind it. The person operating the crane quickly unhooked the raised bounty and strapped it to a buoy on deck. Given the choppy water, the cargo could easily slide overboard. She strained through the steady mist to see them begin emptying the basket. It appeared that what they had found, mostly dark, randomly shaped objects, was probably pieces of her downed drone. She pushed her throttle up to just above idle and moved slowly toward the *Wy Knott*. The boat a hundred yards behind her did the same.

Buried Deep

Joe Bond's desk phone chirped and the station receptionist's harsh voice blared through the speaker.

"I have Ms. Ashleigh Hamilton on line one for you, Joe."

"Thanks, Betty, put her through."

Joe leaned back in his chair and switched the phone from his left ear to his right. He grabbed a yellow pad and pencil and flipped over the top pages until he found his notes regarding the Skipper Johnson case. A soft beep in his ear told him he'd been connected.

"Ashleigh, how are you doing?"

A deceptively mousy voice laughed on the other end of the line. "Just fine, Joe, just fine. And you?"

"Ah well, it's eighty-nine and cloudy, gettin' ready to rain."

"Hurricane season, eh?"

"Yeah, yeah. "He really wanted to dispense with the talk about the weather but it had been years since he had spoken to Ashleigh. "So how's the C.I.A. treatin' ya?"

"Ah well, you know, it's mostly dull paperwork on cold cases... pretty boring really."

He knew this wasn't likely to be true; it sounded like a stock answer. Ashleigh had finished at the top of her class at American University Washington College of Law. The ink was barely dry on her diploma when she'd been recruited by the C.I.A. Joe had met her in New York just after 9/11, before his own accident and subsequent transfer. He'd lost a lot of friends, and worked very hard with the C.I.A. shortly after the attacks to track down suspects living in the city. Ashleigh had appreciated his hours of tough street work and promised him a favor. Now he had a reason to collect.

"Ash, I'm workin' on something down here in Key West."

"Okay." He could hear her tap something out on a computer.

"It's a double homicide from last year and I finally have a lead on a partial print from some pretty cold evidence."

"Okay." More clicking keys.

“My print doesn’t show up on the local database, but it does show up nationally.”

“Well, that’s good.” She didn’t click this time. “Who did you come up with?”

“That’s just it,” —he tried to feel out the best way to come out with it and went for the straightforward approach— “my guy is classified by the C.I.A.”

Much more clicking. “Hmmm, do you have the print on file?” she asked.

“Yup, got him right here.”

“Send it over, and I’ll run it and see what I come up with, but Joe...” she paused.

Suddenly, a prickly sensation twitched the back of his neck. He wondered if he’d stepped over some invisible intelligence line. He clicked the send button and the e-mail was gone.

“I can’t promise anything.” She sounded monotone and unyielding.

He heard the alert beep over the phone, meaning she’d gotten the file. Her quick change to the straight and narrow tone left him convinced she was going to stonewall him. He pictured Ashleigh sitting at her desk looking at his mystery man’s profile on her computer. He knew she couldn’t give up anything too sensitive. Another dead end. He heard a click and a sharp sudden hiss of static.

“Give me your cell number,” she said. “I’ll call you later.”

He told her his number and they said their goodbyes.

“That was weird,” he muttered as he hung up the receiver.

A quick rap on his opaque glass door barely preceded Steve Haney rushing into his office.

“Hey, Steve,” he said sarcastically, “open the door, c’mon in.”

The big man blinked once, didn’t say anything, and turned around and walked back out. He closed the door behind him, knocked on the glass and waited. Joe laughed.

“I was just kidding, Steve, get in here.”

“Now that we’ve dispensed with the pleasantries, take a look at this.”

Steve unfolded a map of the Florida Keys and surrounding waterways. To the west of the islands there were ten small red dots in various locations. They were fairly spread out with no semblance of any pattern.

“Lisa made us a map of the coordinates she found stored in the G.P.S. unit,” Steve explained, “so I got us a boat ready if ya wanna take a trip.”

“In this weather?” Joe stood up and put his hands on his hips. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Steve said, “but if we wanna find anything

out there, we gotta do it before the storm.”

Two minutes down the road, they were soon inside the marina bait and tackle shop watching boats being lifted out of the water.

“Sorry, fellas,” said a grungy kid with dreadlocks behind the counter while shaking his head, “just got the orders from the feds, no more boats in the water.”

“But this is a homicide investigation!” Steve was yelling over the counter.

“Dude, I’m really sorry, wish I could help,” —the kid was holding his hands in the air— “but if I let anyone go out there, I could get locked up. It’s a felony, ya know.”

Steve reached into his back pocket and whipped open his badge. He nearly shoved it into the poor kid’s face.

“Do you see this?” he asked. “We are the police, and we’re the ones who decide who gets arrested and who doesn’t.”

Joe pushed his arm in front of Steve and dragged him back a step.

“Easy, Steve,” he said calmly, “it’s not his fault. It’s no big deal; we’ll just have to wait until the storm passes.”

“But it’s gonna be swept away by then,” he pleaded, with beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead, “we have to get out there today.”

“Hey, we’ve been working on this for a year,” Joe said quietly, “so another week and a storm isn’t going to bury it any more than it is already.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped and he sighed heavily. “You’re right, you’re right.” He slipped his wallet back into his pocket.

He turned to the kid who still had his hands in the air.

“I’m really sorry,” —Steve held out his hand— “I’m just a little tense these days.”

The kid reached out and shook his hand quickly.

“No problem, bro.” He put his other hand down. “I just got a job to do and all, ya know?”

“Yeah.” Steve turned to walk out of the marina shop. “Hopefully in a week I’ll be able to do mine.”

They both quickly jumped into the cruiser to avoid being soaked by the rain. Joe didn’t start the car immediately. Instead he just looked at Steve. “What the heck was all that in there?” he asked.

Steve clicked his seatbelt on and shook his head. “I dunno,” he said with a pained frown on his face, “I just thought we were so close. I mean, breaking a case like this can do a lot for a guy’s career.”

“Hey, take it easy, big guy.” Joe clapped his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I see Lieutenant Detective in your future, but it takes more than one break to prove yourself.”

“I know that,” —the window next to Steve was beginning to fog up from the heat he was generating— “I just got a little worked up with

that punk in there.”

“No worries, my friend.” Joe booted up the hybrid cruiser.” He probably had it coming anyway.”

He was about to pull out when his cellphone vibrated. He opened it to see a voicemail from an anonymous number. He dialed in and waited for the message.

“Hey, Joe, it’s me, Ashleigh,” she said in a hushed tone. “We’ve got to talk. Please call me later.” She repeated her number twice and then paused. “I’m not sure what’s going on here, but your man here is buried deep. Something really big is going on around him.”

Cut The Rope

Troy Clint Bodean couldn't keep himself from grinning like a

Cheshire cat, even through his goggles and regulator mouthpiece. As Megan began to pull pieces out of the basket, the importance of the find hit him.

After just seconds of sifting through the sand on the gulf's floor, they had found hundreds of obvious shipwrecked objects: pottery shards, intricately carved pieces of eating vessels and gourds, carpentry tools, copper bindings and stray pieces of timber that the ship's partial burial had protected. There were several bowling ball sized objects that were unrecognizable under a sheath of coral; Troy had hefted two of them into the basket with considerable effort.

"I think I even saw a piece of a gun!" Troy exclaimed, pulling his goggles up onto his forehead, "and that big dark shape is definitely a cannon. We gotta get that thing up!"

Megan was dumbfounded at their findings. The pottery alone could help them determine if this was their ship or not, but the number of plates and drinking cups they had pilfered into the basket surprised her.

"This is kinda odd," she said, turning one heavily corroded cup over into her hands.

"What's that?" Troy asked.

"Well, the Muerta is basically a casket ship."

"And?"

"What did they need with all this?" she said, holding up a plain drinking cup.

"Well, the crew's gotta eat and drink, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

She was interrupted by the sound of another boat motoring into view. Troy immediately recognized the government vessel.

"Dangit, it's the feds," he muttered, and quickly began placing items back into the basket. "How in the hell'd they find us?"

He stood up and faced the approaching boat, but motioned R.B. to

step closer to him. It was moving slowly toward them and Troy felt it best that they keep this find to themselves as long as possible.

“As quickly and nonchalantly as you can, strap a buoy to this thing and get it back into the water on the other side of the boat,” Troy spoke quietly.

“Got it, bro.”

R.B. was just shoving the basket overboard when the boat pulled alongside. Through the sheeting rain, Troy finally recognized their guest.

“Natasha,” he said as she handed him a rope and climbed aboard the *Wy Knott*, “what brings you out on such a rough night?”

“I might ask you the same.” She adjusted her own poncho and threw her hands up to her hips. “What in God’s name are you doing out here in this weather, and on George Wyatt’s boat?”

How does she know George? Troy wondered to himself? A question best saved for later. He paused for a second and she didn’t seem inclined to fill the silence.

“Let’s go inside,” he said, and motioned toward the ship’s cockpit. “I can explain everything.”

Before they heard the report from the rifle, Troy heard a whiz just over their heads and saw the boards splinter near the roofline of the cabin.

“Down!” was all he had time to yell as he grabbed Megan by her neck and shoved her toward the cockpit floor.

Natasha was already diving for cover.

“Get your ass in here!” Troy yelled to R.B.

He crouched and ran for cover as fast as he could, expecting the next shot to explode somewhere into his body. But it never came. R.B. rushed in and slammed the door behind them. Troy killed all the lights and crawled over to the ship’s throttle. Natasha peered through the glass toward the black water where the shot had come from, but saw nothing.

“Everybody, hang tight,” —Troy reached up to the control panel— “I’m gonna get us out of here.”

“Wait,” Natasha yelled, “my boat is still tied on.”

“We have to cut it loose.”

“It’s a government boat,” she protested, “I can’t just leave it out here.”

“Look, darlin’, it’s you or the boat.” Troy had his hand on the throttle.

Natasha stared hard at him but remained quiet.

“I’ll cut the rope,” R.B. said, pulling out a knife strapped to his thigh.

Troy nodded. “Careful.”

“Always.”

R.B. opened the door and army-crawled his way back out onto the boat's rear deck. Rain pelted his cheeks and forehead and he could feel his heart pounding under the tight wetsuit. As he reached out to cut the mooring rope, another shot whizzed above his head. It pinged off something metallic and he jerked his head around to see what had been hit. A shower of sparks flew off a red, rusted fifty-gallon drum. Under the coating of corrosion, he could just make out the universal triangle symbol for highly flammable contents.

“Shit!” He turned back to the rope and began sawing furiously.

The strong rope barely yielded a few strands, and he cursed his prone position. He just couldn't get enough leverage to cut it from underneath. He sheathed the knife and decided he would just unwind the rope, but he knew he'd have to stand up to do it.

He took in a deep breath and jumped up as fast as he could. He never got close to the loop holding the two boats together. In seemingly slow motion, he heard the whiz of the third shot and a metallic ping before he was blinded by the explosion.

He threw his hands over his face and was hurled into the water.

Part II



Discover

“Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

-Andrew Gide

Rough Riders

Gene Henry spewed a mouthful of coffee as the alarm blared from his computer. He'd been tracking the progress of the *Wy Knott* out into the gulf, taking sonar readings with the engine noise. The resolution gradually got better as the boat neared the shallow reef waters. But the beacon had suddenly gone offline and the alarm had sounded. Gene instinctively grabbed the CB radio.

"*Wy Knott*, this is *Wyatt 1*, what's your status?"

Nothing but static. He repeated this a couple of times, but got no response.

"Dammit, Troy what the hell have you—?" Gene stopped mid-sentence as, one line at a time, one of his computer monitors began producing an amazingly sharp picture of the gulf floor where the beacon last placed the boat.

Panic began to creep into his mind as he studied the picture. The resolution was so good he could see sharp curves and twists in the coral and a trail of scattered rocks or something on the gulf floor. To produce this kind of view, he'd need sound that bordered on thunder, or maybe...

He grabbed the telephone and rang George Wyatt.

"Do you know what time it is?" the oil rigger croaked in a sleepy fog.

"Sorry, George, but you need to see this."

Minutes later he was staring at the computer screen.

"Yeah um... that's great, Gene, but couldn't this have waited till morning?"

Gene clicked back to images from several minutes ago.

"Look," he pointed to the screen, "this is the resolution I was getting before the beacon went out... and this..." He clicked forward. "This is after."

The difference was like looking at an old black and white tintype exposure from the civil war compared to a high definition digital camera picture from today; striking, to say the least.

"Well, that's probably lightning or something, eh?" Wyatt said. That's when it hit him.

"What did you say about the beacon?"

Gene turned to look up at him.

"It went dead just before I got that last image."

"Went dead?" Wyatt demanded. "What the hell do you mean it went dead?"

Wyatt grabbed the radio, but Gene stopped him.

"I tried that, no response."

"Oh, my God." Wyatt looked out the window in the darkness. "We have to get out there."

Suddenly, Bill Bane was standing in the doorway yawning. "That'd be great, boss," he said as he moved into the room, "but we got no boat, remember."

"Shit," Wyatt said, turning to look back at the monitors.

His eye caught some motion on one of the security cameras scanning under the oil rig. He pointed to it.

"No, but we do have a plane."

Gene looked at the seaplane jostling about in the waves tied to the lower deck. "Now, who in the heck's gonna fly that piece of junk?"

"Gene, you know I can fly."

"But you're not instrument rated," he protested, "and its pitch black out there and storming."

"I don't see that we have much choice."

He looked at Bill, who nodded at him.

"Bill and I will go," he said. "You keep your eye on us, and we'll keep her low under the weather; if anything happens, radio the coast guard and tell them where we're located."

"No!" Gene stood up. "This is crazy. This is a very bad idea. I knew we shouldn't have let them go out, and I'm not going to let you go out there searching for them."

Wyatt put his hands-on Gene's shoulders. "I can't just leave them out there. It may be nothing; maybe the lightning that gave you the picture struck the boat and shorted everything out, including the beacon."

Gene's tight-lipped scowl relaxed. "You're right," he said after a moment. "It's probably nothing. But let's wait till dawn. It'll be light in about two hours."

"That's a good idea, boss," Bill said to Wyatt.

"Two hours? In this storm?" Wyatt raised his voice. "We may never find them!"

"If they are out there without power, we won't be able to see 'em anyway," Bill said.

"Dammit," Wyatt finally said, nodding, "you're probably right."

He looked out the window at the wild waves and sheets of rain pelting the deck in huge swaths of water. Dangerous weather to be out in.

"Tell you what, Gene; you check that plane to see how much fuel we have. Bill, you and I should get diving gear ready just in case they are in the water... hopefully, they'll be able to float for a while."

"Let's just hope they ain't in the water."

"Yeah," Wyatt said and shrugged.

It seemed like forever before dawn crept in light gray over the oil rig. The three of them stood by the seaplane. The weather was harsh, and the wind had picked up to thirty miles an hour. Staying balanced on the catwalks below the rig was a constant white-knuckled battle.

"Make sure you've idled out well beyond the pylons before you take off," —Gene pointed out to the gulf— "don't want to get blown back into us."

"Roger that," Wyatt said, and gave him a *thumbs-up*.

"I'll keep an eye on you guys and the weather. If that storm gets anywhere near you, turn north and just get the hell out of there."

"Gotcha."

George Wyatt and Bill Bane climbed into the small plane. Gene untied them and they taxied out into the buffeting waves. They watched as Gene began the long walk up in the driving rain back to his control room.

The wind shook them around violently and the ever-strengthening waves threatened to turn them over.

"Let's get this thing in the air, boss," Bill shouted over the noise.

The plane picked up slowly in the rough chop and Wyatt wondered if they'd ever get enough speed to lift off. But finally, they limped into the air.

"Gene, you got us?" he called into the radio.

"I gotcha," he radioed back. "Rough ride ahead, so make it quick."

Gene gave them the G.P.S. coordinates of the last beacon ping and they headed east. Wyatt kept the plane as low as he could stand, about a hundred feet off the water. He figured if they went down, at least it wouldn't be too far to fall.

He looked over at Bill. It would've been slightly comical to see the big black man shaking so badly, if he hadn't been scared to death himself.

"Don't worry, Bill," he said, clapping his shoulder, "we're gonna be alright."

"Whatever you say, Boss," he said, then grinned a tight smile. "Whatever you say."

Ahab's Cellphone

When he finally rolled his way back to the surface, R.B. could taste the coppery blood in his mouth, his ears still ringing violently from the blast. He looked around to see the *Wy Knott* sink into the water. He thought for a moment that Natasha's government boat might break free and remain afloat. But the blast had torn through the side of it as well and soon it was taking on water. Within ten minutes, both boats were headed to the bottom.

He knew it must be getting near dawn, but with the storm right on top of them, it was still pitch black.

"Troy!!" he yelled into the violent wind. "Megan!!"

No reply.

He swam as hard as he could in the churning waves toward the smoldering pieces floating and flipping on the surface. He frantically pushed through the rubble. His breath became shallow and panic began to drip into his mind. There was no sign of anyone else alive.

Suddenly, a figure crashed through the waves a few feet away from him. Troy had his arms tight around Megan's waist. She was out cold from what looked like a violent blow to her temple. Blood streamed down from her matted hair.

"Oh my God," R.B. shouted and swam toward them. "What happened?"

Troy grabbed the first large piece of debris near him and shifted Megan over to his back. He gasped for breath.

R.B. could tell Troy was banged up a bit but saw no blood. All the blood was coming from Megan's forehead.

"We went down inside the cabin and when the blast blew out the windows, she got hit," Troy said, "piece of wood or something."

R.B. nodded. "Natasha?"

Troy shook his head.

"Never even saw her."

R.B. paddled away from them and began shouting into the storm. "Natasha!!"

He went on for a few minutes, but got no response. After a few minutes, he swam back to join Troy and Megan. The waves had gotten so violent that it was hard to hang on to the—

R.B. looked down; it was the basket with the pieces of ship wreck. The buoy he'd tied to it when they first saw Natasha was keeping them afloat. He almost smiled at the irony.

"The only ship that stayed afloat is the one that's been wrecked for a few hundred years."

Even Troy smirked darkly at this. R.B. looked around. Waves were now violently tossing them up and down. In the dark dawn, he couldn't tell which direction they were drifting. He could only pray that the hurricane would rush past them and not carry them along, swallowing them up as they went.

R.B. looked back at Troy, who was staring down into the basket. Even in the driving rain, he saw tears rolling from his eyes. Natasha would never come back from this trip. Troy's hand rubbed along the frame of the basket and he had a strange, faraway look in his eyes. A shiver went up R.B.'s spine; he couldn't help but picture Captain Ahab tangled up in ropes astride the back of the slain Moby Dick.

SOMEWHERE AT THE bottom of the gulf, a cellphone flashed to life in muted green monotone. A startled school of fish darted away from it. The message clicked up on the screen:

-REPORT

Cover That Up

Joe Bond rubbed his lower back. The pain was intensified with the quickly degenerating weather. Julie Matthews, Channel 7 news anchorwoman, was prattling away on his television about Hurricane Daniel. Though the coming storm was very dangerous, it had been declining in strength and was now being categorized as a Class Two hurricane; big enough to trash the island, but small enough to require emergency personnel to stay put.

He clicked off the television and walked over to his window. Heavy rain pelted the street outside and the wind sent the trees thrashing from side to side. He turned the crank beside the window that lowered the hurricane shutter into place. Several minutes later he closed the last shield and darkness drowned the small house. He made his way into the kitchen and found his flashlight before the power blinked and then went out.

He plopped down on his brand new micro suede recliner he'd treated himself to after his last raise and clicked open his cellphone. Two bars of service blinked on the screen. *Probably not enough*, he thought. He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and dialed the number Ashleigh had given him.

"Hello?" Her voice was quiet.

"Ashleigh, it's me, Joe."

"Okay, give me ten minutes," she whispered, "I'll call you back."

"Sure."

He closed his phone and closed his eyes. He couldn't sleep with the throbbing pain in his back so he just lay there and mulled over the past few days. His instincts told him something bigger than just a murder was going on here, but he didn't have enough information to put the puzzle together. He wondered why the C.I.A. had this guy covered up. He had a stray thought that maybe he should just let this go, as he didn't want the clandestine government agency on his case.

Ten minutes later, on the dot, his cellphone beeped. The caller ID was a blocked number.

"Hello."

"Hey, Joe, it's me." Ashleigh sounded a little more like herself. "I had to call you from outside the building, as everything's wired in there."

"I understand."

"Okay, your guy is a man named Hector Martinez."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, he has a few charges related to drug running out of Cuba into Florida."

Joe sat up. That explained a lot. The Johnson boys probably stumbled onto Hector and his thugs making a run to the Keys and he had killed them. But that still didn't explain the mysterious disappearance of the G.P.S. unit. Maybe Hector had some sort of system of dumping the drugs into the ocean and a contact in the Keys picked it up. That had a nice ring to it. The boys had found it, bragged about it at the bar, and Hector had waited for them to come back to bring it up and murdered them. Then needing to secure the location, he took the G.P.S. and left the boat to drift away.

"Okay, thanks, Ashleigh," he said, "that helps a lot. I think we can —"

"Wait," she interrupted him, "there's more."

Joe sat up. A sharp pain stabbed him in the back. He grunted heavily.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, just a little arthritis."

"You're getting old," she said, and laughed.

"Tell me about it." He eased back into the chair. "Anyway, what else have you got."

"Well, first of all, this guy is classified up to level two clearance."

"Okay," he said matter-of-factly.

"That means only the Director of the C.I.A. and the President have access to this file."

He sat up again, more carefully this time. "And you got it how?"

She was quiet for a minute. "Best you don't know that."

"Okay." Joe felt his eyebrows rise. "So, what's so special about this guy?"

"He's working for us."

Joe sat stunned, unable to speak.

"Get this," —Ashleigh sounded as if she was reading from a file— "Hector has been feeding us information from inside Cuba for about a year now. He makes contact somewhere in the gulf with an operative stationed in Florida."

"Who's the operative?"

"Just says the operative is code name: Stingray."

“Stingray,” Joe repeated, “doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Whoever it is would have to be close, maybe someone who has moved there within the last couple of years.”

“I’ll check it out.”

“Anyway,” she continued, “In exchange for his cooperation, our patrols avert their eyes when he’s making runs of his own.”

“So, the C.I.A. is now in the drug-running business?”

She stopped for a minute. *Ouch*, he wished he hadn’t put that so harshly.

“I only meant that—”

“No, no,” she interrupted him again, “that’s exactly what it looks like.”

It was her turn to be stunned and silent. Suddenly, another thought came to him. “So, maybe the Johnson boys stumbled into Hector while he was making the drop and the agent had something to do with...” He trailed off.

“Well, it is possible, but that seems too messy for a C.I.A. cover-up. More likely, they would’ve made the whole thing—the boys, the boat and the G.P.S.—disappear.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

He ran over all the pieces of this ever-deepening mystery. “So, what I’ve got so far is two dead boys, a drug runner from Cuba, a dirty C.I.A. operative and a cover-up that runs all the way up to the Director of the C.I.A.”

“Yeah, that’s about all I have here.” Ashleigh sounded baffled by everything in the file. “What I can’t figure out, is why this is so classified. I mean, the C.I.A. has performed much harsher ops to accomplish far simpler objectives, and my clearance is usually plenty high enough to open those files. This just seems like trading drugs for info.”

Joe nodded to himself. “I know, and it’s info that doesn’t seem all that relevant or sensitive. I mean, Cuba isn’t exactly the hotbed of action against the U.S. like it used to be.”

“Exactly.”

“I still think it has something to do with this particular location in the gulf,” he said, urging himself to stand up from his chair. “It all started with the G.P.S. and I think that’s what ties this together.”

He walked into the kitchen, opened a drawer, and cracked open a bottle of Tylenol. He poured four of them into his palm, pulled a diet coke out of the fridge, and washed down the pills.

“I need to find this guy, Hector,” he said. “Any info on where this guy is in Cuba?”

“Well,” —he could hear her shuffling papers around in the file— “I think I can do better than that. As an informant with a somewhat

shady history, we probably tagged him with a locator.”

“Okay, what does that mean?”

“Well, it means you can track him, if you have the right locator program.”

“Ah, of course I don’t have that program.” He shuffled his way back into the living room. “Can you tell me where he is?”

“Are you on a smart phone?”

“Yup.”

“Give me ten minutes and I’ll upload the program, so you should be able to track him through your phone.”

“Nice,” he said, sitting down heavily in the recliner, “that would be excellent.”

“Joe,” she said quietly.

“Yes?”

“You know that none of this information I’ve given you can ever be linked to me.”

“Trust me, I won’t get you fired,” he said.

“I’m not worried about getting fired.”

Joe’s mouth opened but nothing came out.

“It’s okay,” Ashleigh reassured him, “just keep this between you and me.”

“Of course.”

“Goodbye, Joe.”

“Bye.”

He clicked the phone shut. Two minutes later his phone beeped, it was the download from Ashleigh. He installed the program and within a half hour had located Hector Martinez.

He dialed his partner. “Steve, gear up,” he said. “We’re going to South Beach.”

“Sweet!” Steve’s voice was lively on the other end.

“On business, Steve.”

“Awwwww, damn.”

“Just meet me at the station in twenty minutes.”

“You got it.”

A Blaze Of Glory

The figure in the soaked poncho didn't bother to slow his approach up onto the sandy beach. His boat crunched to a halt and he killed the engine. He shivered as he shouldered a rifle and fought the deafening wind to exit the boat. Dim lights lined a walkway up from the sand through the stinging rain into the arched opening in the high brick walls. He gripped the pathway railing tightly and pulled himself onward. With his head buried in his hood, he never noticed the second boat resting on the far side of the beach.

"Home, sweet home," the figure said to himself as he nearly dove through the door and out of the weather.

James Howard shook the rain from his shoulders, rumbled the poncho into a heap by the door, and headed down the long hallway toward his quarters. He felt safe from the storm sheltered by Fort Jefferson's thick stone tunnels. His footsteps echoed as he hurried back to his room.

He finally shuffled through his door and slammed it behind him. He let his back thump against it and closed his eyes. He was glad to have that little piece of business behind him.

The computer on his desk was the only softly glowing light in his room and he could see the screensaver flickering back and forth. He moved to the desk and propped the rifle against the side as he slumped down into his chair. He inhaled a deep breath and wiggled the mouse to bring the computer to life.

While he waited for the screen to pop up, he pulled his cellphone from his pocket. He scrolled up to the number he had listed as Big Brother, his own private jab at his present superior. He composed a carefully coded text message to convey that his latest mission had been carried out successfully. He pushed the send button and was startled when from a dark corner of the room came the familiar chirp of a received message.

"What the—"

He was interrupted by a shrill whoosh of air and a sharp sting in

his neck. Fear raced through his veins and he tried to stand up, but the fluid rushing into his jugular vein was icy and had him paralyzed in seconds.

His eyes flicked to the barrel of his rifle leaning against his desk, but his hands were powerless to reach for it. He could hear something move in the darkness beyond his desk. He watched in horror as a figure emerged in the glow of a newly opened cellphone.

James' vision began to waiver and his fear began edging into terror. His forehead trickled with sweat and his pulse began to race. He couldn't recognize the face of his intruder in the dim light.

"Who the hell is there?" he demanded with a heavy tongue.

The man tapped a few buttons on his cellphone and clicked it shut to disappear back into the darkness.

"You sure you got 'em all?" the voice asked.

James' lips began to feel thick and he slurred slightly.

"Yeshh," he said, concentrating. "Yess, they were all there."

"You done good," the man said.

Suddenly, a small flame flared into view illuminating the man's face as he lit a cigar.

"You done real good," Vince Pinzioni said as the embers of his smoke smoldered between his leather-gloved thumb and fingers.

"Why?" James pleaded, sinking down into what seemed like a deep dark staircase. "What have you... done to me?"

Vince stepped over and clicked on a small lamp that rested on the corner of James' desk. He sat down on one corner of the desk and plucked the dart from the park ranger's neck.

"My own special concoction," he said and twisted the long dart in his fingers, "induces complete paralysis, then makes a person's blood work look as though he's been on a drinking binge with a healthy dose of PCP."

James moaned; he knew what was happening. A loose end was being tied up.

"By the time da police get here," Vince explained matter-of-factly, "it'll look like you got stoned to da bejesus and shot yourself."

James' eyes went wide. His body was now completely heavy and limp. His glance flitted to the rifle again.

"Yeah, ain't that a bitch." Vince followed his gaze. "If only, eh? Fughedaboutit."

James could feel tears trickling down his cheeks. "But, I killed zhaa man who sssshhot the plane down," he protested, "And zhen I went to the shhhpot... got all the others on the boat too. I did what you..."

"Now, now, no reason to get all mushy on me," Vince mocked, wiping the moisture from James' face. "You done real good, but you know we can't have any loose ends hangin' about."

With a supreme effort, James quickly turned his head and bit down hard on Vince's fingers. Until his jaw went numb again, he clamped down as tightly as he could. He tasted blood as Vince yelled.

"Sonofa..." the Italian smashed his fist into the side of James' head again and again and finally the ranger's jaw went limp.

He pulled his hand from his leather glove and could see the deep punctures in his fingers. Blood trickled down and splattered on the desk.

James smiled weakly. Vince punched him again, but the drugs were now coursing through his veins so thickly that the ranger felt nothing.

Vince pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped up the blood he could see on the desk and computer keyboard. He wrapped the cloth around his bleeding fingers and gingerly pulled his glove back over them.

He shoved James' chair back from the desk and opened the center drawer. The ranger's heavily lidded eyes followed the Italian man's hand. It reached for the Government Issue Glock that James had never fired.

Vince checked to see if it was loaded and slid the clip back into the pistol's handle. He turned toward the computer and had a moment of inspiration. He opened a word processing program and tapped out what he thought was a brilliant letter of sorrow and loneliness. He wrote a goodbye letter expressing a struggle with isolation and drug use that were sure to fit the scene of this soon to be suicide. He clicked *save*, but left the note open on the screen.

With that, he wrapped James' hand around the gun's grip and fired it once into the big man's throat. Gore and blood splattered the wall behind.

Vince let the gun fall to the floor near the dead park ranger. He clicked open his cellphone and dialed.

"Yeah, it's done."

He laughed and read part of his suicide note to the person on the line. Apparently, the voice on the other end did not think this was funny at all. Vince deleted the note and turned off the computer.

"Yeah, yeah, I deleted it."

He listened for a minute more and hung up the phone. His hand ached as he walked out of the fort and onto the windswept beach. The wind, now ferociously strong, pushed him down once. He propped himself up on the walkway railing and waited for a lull in the storm. When it finally came, he ran to his own boat and shoved hard until it released into the stormy water. His engine roared to life and he rode as fast as the waves would allow back toward Key West.

This Too Shall Pass

The wind around the drifting survivors whipped stinging rain into their faces. Surges at least ten feet high lifted and dropped them over and over. R.B. got sick and heaved until his stomach held no more. Troy drifted on the edge of consciousness, aware that passing out meant certain death for him and, more importantly, for Megan. He willed himself to hang on to the floating basket of shipwreck rubble even as the hurricane tried to rip him from it.

Megan's head lolled from side to side; the bleeding had slowed, but she had not awoken. A cloudy, blotted night sky left them stranded and beaten in total darkness. Troy wondered how long it would be before they just gave up and sank to the bottom, back to his shipwreck yet again. He thought it appropriate that his final resting place would be among the less fortunate travelers aboard the sunken Señora de la Muerta.

R.B. must've seen the resignation on his face and called out to him.

"We're gonna make it," he yelled over the violent surges. "The storm won't last for more than a few hours."

Troy nodded and wondered how long his grip would hold out. He thought idly about trying to swim away from the storm's heading but then realized he had no way of knowing what direction that was; best just to hold on and hope the storm wasn't carrying them along with it.

Megan's head suddenly jerked up and she screamed. She looked around wildly clearly terrified by their deadly surroundings. Troy shook her until she finally came to her senses.

"Where? How?" she finally asked in a painful groan.

"Somewhere above the shipwreck." Troy nodded to the basket that was keeping them afloat.

She said nothing. A few moments later it dawned on her that they were one short.

"Natasha?"

Troy just shook his head. "I dunno. She hasn't come up."

A new round of whipping wind grabbed them and slammed Megan

into Troy's back.

"Sorry," she moaned.

She stretched her arms out and pulled herself off his back over to the basket. She wrapped her arms into one of the ropes holding them afloat. Troy sighed with relief. Her dead weight had been straining his own arms more than he had realized.

With amazing suddenness, the wind stopped. The surges continued, but not nearly as violent or high.

"Thank God!" R.B. yelled.

"It's not over yet," Megan said, and looked around them. "We're most likely in the eye of the storm."

Troy laid his head down on the basket between them. "Save your strength," he mumbled and drifted off to sleep.

Amazingly, he dreamt of gold and treasure, but as bright and shining and close as it seemed, it slowly dimmed and fell away. It looked like it was falling into the deepest, darkest well.

Troy awoke suddenly to a new wave crashing over them and threatening to flip them into the white-capped water. Megan was unconscious again and R.B.'s eyes were opening and closing. His grip was loose and this new wave jerked him away from the basket.

"Dammit!" Troy yelled "R.B., wake up!"

Nothing, no response. He frantically ripped his belt off and began strapping it under Megan's lifeless arms and through the mesh of the basket. R.B.'s head dipped below the water.

"NO!"

He clasped his belt and dove into the surging water after R.B. In the darkness he could see nothing, and icy terror stung its way into his lungs. He rose and took a deep breath and dove again. He thrashed his arms wildly and kicked his legs hard to dive deeper. He knew he could easily get lost in the rolling water and never find his way back to the basket. *Hell, I might not even find the surface again.* He strained to see in the dark water, the salt burning his eyes. Nothing.

Then, miraculously, he felt R.B. slide past him. He grabbed his shirt and tugged as hard as he could. They broke the surface only to be met with more pounding waves. Troy looked around. The sun was beginning to shine a gray light through the sheets of rain. He caught a glimpse of the basket and the limp body strapped to it. It looked like it was already miles away and moving further away from them every second.

He rolled R.B. over onto his back and swam as hard as he could. His legs and arms were already burning, and it seemed that every breath he took was half air and half salt water.

What seemed like hours later, Troy latched his numb fingers to the basket. Megan was still strapped safely to the side. He checked R.B.

and by yet another miracle he was breathing. Out like a light, but breathing. He didn't know if the waves had crushed the water out of his lungs or if he'd simply coughed it up on his own, but he was safe for the time being. He ripped his shirt off and wound it under R.B.'s arms and strapped him to the flailing basket as well.

He knew then that their survival depended on him staying awake and afloat. He held on for dear life. For what seemed like days the water stung his eyes and his exposed back. He couldn't feel his fingers and his arms and shoulders ached and burned; he resigned himself to the fact that his strength would probably give out and he would let go and drift away. At least he had given his friends a chance of surviving.

And that was when it finally stopped.

Troy watched as the waves moved away from them and the darkest skies left them behind. It was still rough at times, but nothing like the past few hours. He checked his friends. Megan was breathing and her cut had stopped bleeding. R.B. was also breathing, though somewhat labored. Troy laid his head down on the basket.

Distractedly, he worried about how he would get them back to shore. But he would think about that later. He had gotten them this far; he'd figure out how to get them the rest of the way home later.

As they drifted, he felt his eyes getting heavier, but he couldn't sleep. No. No sleep. The storm still thrashed violently and loudly away from them. But in his delirium, between surge splashes and wind whips, he almost thought he could make out the distant buzzing of a motor. He jerked his head up and scanned the churning gulf water. A couple of feet away from their makeshift life raft, he saw an Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat bobbing on the surface. He groaned as he realized the peacock feather was gone. Like a scene in a movie, the hat slowly floated back toward him. When it touched his arm, he picked it out of the water and shook it off.

"Welcome back, old friend," he said as he perched it on top of his head.

Shielding his eyes, he scanned the horizon. Nothing. Just his imagination. Idly, he wondered how long they would last exposed to the harsh elements. He wondered how long it would take before the sharks made their way back into these waters.

Can You Hear Me Now?

The flight aboard *Gidget*, Troy's small seaplane, was rough, and that was putting it mildly. George Wyatt and Bill Bane were scanning the waves below them for any sign of the oil rig's tanker, the *Wy Knott*. So far, they hadn't seen anything. No boat, no debris, no people. Nothing.

"Boss, we've been out here for three hours flying over this spot," Bill said over the rushing wind. "They ain't here."

Wyatt studied the water. "But this is where the beacon stopped sending a signal. They have to be here."

And then it dawned on him; a boat without power does not sit still in moving water.

"That's it," he said and pointed toward the dark violent sky, "the hurricane has dragged them."

Bill was shaking his head vigorously. "Don't even think about it. We ain't goin' in there."

"But they're in there," he said, already turning the plane toward the storm, "my boat is in there!"

Bill didn't reply, he just pointed his finger at the fuel gauge. They had enough to keep flying, but not enough to search and then make the flight back.

"Dammit!"

"We have to go back, boss," Bill said quietly. "We'll refuel and come back for another round."

Wyatt knew he was right. He stared into the distance. He knew they were out there. "Damn," he said again.

"If they made it through the night," Bill said, "they'll still be there when we get back. If they didn't, we'll know that too."

With that, George Wyatt turned the plane back toward the *Wyatt 1*.

He picked up the CB. "*Wyatt 1* this is the *Gidget*, you got any word on that storm."

Gene's voice cracked over the static. "Yep, it's headed for land, but not even at level two anymore."

Wyatt looked at Bill and nodded. Maybe they actually did have a chance of surviving.

"We're gonna need some more fuel, so can you have it ready when we get there?"

"You got it. Over."



GENE CLICKED off his CB radio and headed out to the fuel station aboard the oil rig, *Wyatt 1*. The rain had finally stopped and the first rays of sunlight were straining through the clouds.

He turned on the fuel pump's generator and began filling a fifty-gallon drum. He whistled for a minute and pulled out his cellphone. He flipped through the latest messages and clicked to reply to a few random notes from his mother. He closed the cellphone and wiped away a stray drop of rain from the outside cover.

He stared hard at the phone and suddenly had a thought. He squeezed the pump, willing it to go faster. Finally, the pump clicked off and he jammed it back onto the machine. He turned off the generator and ran toward his command room.

He picked up the CB radio and almost yelled. "George, I got it!

For a long second, he heard nothing. Panic crept into his mind. *Oh, my God, did something happen to them, did they run out of gas?*

"Whaddaya got, Gene?" Wyatt's voice finally crackled through the speakers.

"Geezus," Gene said and slumped down in his chair. "What took so long?"

"Well, I am flying a plane out of a hurricane here."

"Okay, okay, sorry, just a little stressed out here."

"No problemo, Gene, you got my attention. Now what have you got?"

"Cellphones, was anyone carrying their cellphone?"

"I can't imagine they wouldn't be, why do you ask?"

"All phones newer than two or three years old have a G.P.S. chip in them. If I can get that signal, we can track to someone's cellphone."

"Sounds good, Gene. The question is, will that work if they're in the water."

Gene had to catch his breath. He hadn't really considered that possibility.

"Oh, um..." he shook his head. "I don't know."

"Well, get on that. It's all we have at this point."

GEORGE TURNED TO BILL. "Well, it isn't much."

“Better than nothin’, boss.”

A jolt shook them both harshly. The seaplane’s engine popped loudly and sputtered. And then was quiet.

“Holy Crap!” Wyatt yelled, “what just happened?”

Bill tapped the gas gauge. *Empty*.

Wyatt peered in front of them as the plane glided along no more than a hundred feet above the water.

“Look!” he said and pointed out the windshield.

The towering shape of the *Wyatt 1* was hazily coming into view.

“We gonna make it?” Bill asked nervously.

“It’s a long way.”

Wind still buffeted the plane and they were quickly losing airspeed. They dropped lower and lower. Wyatt fought the stick to keep them airborne.

“Come on, baby,” he said as they plunged dangerously close to the water.

The pontoons skimmed the surface but then a gust of wind miraculously lifted them back to about ten feet above the water. Sweat was beading on Bill’s forehead.

“It’s okay, Bill,” he reassured the man, “we can take it down and swim if we have to; we’re okay.”

“You know I can’t swim,” Bill said, his breath shallow, “and how we gonna get the plane back to the rig?”

Wyatt just shook his head. “We’re not gonna make it.”

“Damn,” Bill said.

The plane drifted close to the surface again and Wyatt put it down fairly well for his first ever water landing. They were still about forty yards from the rig—not far at all—but too far to drag the plane by hand.

Wyatt took off his headphones and handed them to Bill.

“Wait here. I’ll swim over, get a line and attach it to the winch, and Gene will pull us in.”

Bill said nothing, and just nodded.

Half an hour later Wyatt was flat on his back breathing heavily with Gene standing over him.

“Decided to go for a swim?” Gene asked, grinning.

“Yeah.” Wyatt looked back toward the plane.

It looked amazingly far away.

“I’m gonna need a minute before I head out.”

“Well, I have great news,” Gene said as he clapped his shoulder. “While you were out joyriding, I got a rep from Troy’s cell company to give me the G.P.S. frequency from his phone.”

“And?” Wyatt sat up.

“I got em.”

Wyatt sighed heavily. *They must be alright.*

"They're about twelve miles north of where we got our last signal before they lost power. C'mon, I'll show you."

Several minutes later Gene was circling a dot on a map. "Right here is the last beacon signal before the lightning or... whatever hit 'em." He took his pen and drew a line north. "And this is where Troy is now."

"Or at least that's where his cellphone is," Wyatt mumbled.

Gene looked up at him. "They're okay, George. You know how Troy is, he never gives up."

"Anyway, we better get to them before they drift away again."

The CB radio crackled. Gene realized he'd been squeezing the trigger leaving the line open.

"Speakin' of driftin'," Bill's voice came over the speaker, "when they hell y'all gonna come get me?"

Shot Through The Heart

Joe Bond and Steve Haney followed Hector Martinez's trail—thanks to Ashleigh's help with the implanted tracking device—all the way to South Beach.

"He's somewhere in there," Joe said, looking up from his smart phone and pointing at the beachside hotel.

"The Clevelander, eh?" Steve said with a shrug. "Ballsy, not exactly an out of the way hidden retreat."

"C'mon, let's go." Joe opened the cruiser's door and headed into the hotel.

At the front desk, they flashed their badges and asked to see a list of guests at the hotel. Out of the fifty-four cable television equipped rooms, there were only twenty guests registered. All of them had checked in more than two days ago and had subsequently been evacuated by the storm. All that is, except for one. A *Henry Miller* was checked into a room on the third floor.

"Bingo, that was easy," Joe said. "Steve, stay here, and find out how he paid for that room. Trace it."

"You got it."

"I'm just going to scope things out," he said, pointing to the stairs, "so when you're through here, come on up."

Steve gave him a thumbs up and started clicking into the hotel registration files.

They were both in plainclothes, but Joe still thought he should take the stairs up, just in case Hector got spooked when he saw a strange man coming down his hallway.

Joe pulled his gun and slowly opened the door to the third floor. Nothing. No one was in the hallway. He gingerly closed the stairway door and quietly made his way to the room where *Henry Miller* was staying. He listened at the door. He could hear the television was on, but didn't hear anyone moving around in the room. *Probably lying on the bed watching a movie.* Joe pictured the room in his mind; two double beds, table between them, armoire with the television directly

in front of the beds, bathroom to the right.

He figured the best thing here might be to speak to Hector from behind the door. Try to get him to come out on his own. The show on the television blared louder. Gunshots startled Joe for a second but he realized it was only the movie. A second later a chainsaw roared, followed by a lot of yelling and screaming.

Joe moved away from the door and had to smile at the irony. Hector was watching *Scarface*. Well, he sure wasn't going to let this meeting with a drug-runner go down like that one scene in the movie. The elevator down the hall let out an impossibly loud ring and the doors slid open. Steve came strolling out.

"What the hell?" Joe hissed.

"What? What?" Steve shrugged.

Joe gave him a harsh look and put his index finger on his lip to silence his partner. Steve saw that Joe had his gun drawn and pulled out his own from his shoulder holster.

Suddenly, Hector's door whooshed open. He poked his head out into the hallway, the sounds of *Scarface* blaring behind him. His wife-beater tank was yellowed with sweat, his boxers were tattered and dirty, and his feet were bare.

"Shit!" he yelled and slammed the door shut.

"Hector wait," Joe yelled at the door, "we just want to talk to you."

"I knew you would be coming," he shouted back, "but you will never catch me, cabron."

Knew we'd be coming? Steve mouthed the words to Joe.

Joe just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"Hector, we just need to ask you some questions about a boating accident that happened just off Key West." Joe hoped he could trick Hector into thinking he wasn't a suspect.

Scarface still sputtered through the door. Joe stood up and walked across the hallway. He nodded to Steve that he was going to kick the door in. He took two steps and kicked hard. Sharp pain shot up from his leg into his back.

"Agh, sonofa—"

Steve pushed him out of the way and did the same, and this time the door flew open to reveal an empty room, the window open.

"Shit!" Steve ran across to the window.

Joe limped in, agony manifested in beading sweat droplets on his forehead. Three stories down, sloshing to the edge of the Cleveland's world-famous pool, was Hector.

"Dammit!" Joe said. "Go after him, I can't."

Steve ran out of the room and disappeared down the hall.

When Joe finally caught his breath and the pain in his back numbed a little, he stood up and looked around the room. There was

no luggage, no clothing, just a rumpled paper bag sitting on the bedside table. He limped over to the bag, plopped down on the bed, and laid his pistol on the table.

He opened the bag and emptied the contents onto the bed beside him. A small key on a ring with a bobber, a small dirty piece of paper with some scribbling on it, and a bottle of Patron tequila.



STEVE HANEY RAN AS FAST as his thick linebacker legs would carry him. Hector was a hundred yards in front of him. His lungs were burning and he didn't know how much further he could go, when suddenly Hector turned and ducked into a nearby restaurant.

Steve caught up to find the place dark. *Closed Due To Hurricane Daniel* read a sign on the door. He pushed on the door, surprised to find it open. A bell jingled loudly on the inside, announcing his presence. *Dammit.*

A stray pot clanged in the kitchen. Steve crouched behind the tables and chairs. He didn't know if this dude had a gun, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Hector," he called into the darkness, "we just need to ask you some questions."

"I know how this works, Cantamananas." Hector sounded out of breath and was wheezing frantically. "You take me in, and no one ever hears from me again."

Steve shook his head in confusion. "What are you talking about?" he yelled. "I'm with the Key West Police Department. My partner and I are investigating a murder and we found your fingerprint on their boat. If you have an explanation for that, then we don't have a problem."

Hector said nothing, and continued breathing erratically. He sounded scared.

"You try to trick me," —the man sounded ragged and near tears— "but I know, Chupaverga, I know what happens to guys like me. I get disappeared."

What the hell is he talking about? Steve wondered.

"Your man at the fort told me all about it," Hector groaned. "I will die before you take me."

"Look, Hector, I'm gonna put my gun away and we can talk." He shouldered his gun and stood up. "Now, look, I don't know what information you have about this murder, but all we need to do is—"

Hector crashed through the room with his arms raised over his head, an enormous kitchen cleaver in his hands. He was screaming as he ran toward Steve.

"You will never take me to that evil place again!"

"Shit!" Steve knelt, re-drew his gun, and fired three shots. Hector's knife clattered to the ground and his body slammed into a table with chairs stacked on top. Steve jumped up and backed out of the way of the crashing debris.

He looked down at Hector and pulled out his cellphone. He dialed Joe.

"Is everything okay?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess you could say that." Steve shook his head. "I had to shoot him, he was coming at me with a knife."

"Dammit."

"I know. I tried to talk him down," Steve said, "but he was terrified. Said I was gonna take him to an evil place. He kept babbling about the man at the fort."

"What fort? Fort Jefferson?"

"I dunno."

"Weird."

"Yeah, no joke."

"Miami P.D. is on the way here, so I'll have them send a car down to check it out. We've got some interesting evidence here to check out. Coupla DVDs and a bunch of drugs."

"Okay, I'll see you in a few."

"Gotcha."



JOE CLICKED the phone shut and looked at the dirty piece of paper he found in the bag. It was a list of ten coordinates. They matched exactly with the ones they'd recovered from the sunken G.P.S. unit.

"So, Hector was there," he mumbled aloud. "Still don't know what the hell for."

He held the key up and studied it. No markings, no numbers, nothing, but they could match it to Hector's boat with a little help from the marina.

Joe rubbed his aching neck. "And who the hell was strong-arming Hector at Fort Jefferson?"

He carefully placed everything back into the bag and waited for the Miami P.D. *Looks like we might be going on another boat ride*, he thought, as sirens wailed in the distance.

Dreams Of You

Amazingly, the sky above the drifting survivors broke open, and sunbeams glittered off the increasingly calm water around them. R.B. and Megan were both in a near coma-like lethargy and Troy couldn't keep his eyes open for more than a minute at a time. Unforgivingly, the sun began to bake them as it rose higher into the morning sky.

A beautiful day to die, Troy thought. They were too far to have any hope of swimming to the islands and the current was most likely not heading for land. Troy looked down into the basket of shipwreck salvage. It looked like a bunch of rusty junk. *I've killed them for some old pieces of antique store iron*. He put his head down on the basket, closed his eyes and waited for the end.

"THERE!" Bill pointed slightly to the north of the coordinates they had read from the G.P.S. ping from Troy's cellphone.

"Hot Damn," George Wyatt said as he swung the plane around, "I can't believe it."

"Gene, we got em!" Bill said over the radio to the the oil rig. "They're in the water, probably gonna need medical attention."

"I'm on it," Gene's voice crackled back.

"Hold on, Bill." Wyatt took the plane around the drifting refugees to give them some landing distance. He took the plane down and coasted up to the basket. Nobody moved.

"Oh God," he said, and sat stunned for a minute. They all looked dead.

And then, with what seemed like supreme effort, Troy's head lifted, and he smiled.

"Hot Damn." Wyatt threw his headphones off and climbed out onto the plane's pylons.

"What took you so long?" Troy croaked through cracked lips.

"Eh, you know, took a bit of a swim to relax first."

Troy laughed and then slumped back over the basket. Within a few minutes, Wyatt and Bill had dragged the three of them into the plane

and wrapped blankets around them. R.B. opened his eyes for a second, but then drifted back to unconsciousness. Megan never came around. The cut on her forehead looked worse now than it had in the water.

Troy shook her harshly. "Megan! Megan, wake up!"

Wyatt grabbed him and shoved him back into a seat on the plane.

"She's fine, Troy," he said and looked him in the eye. "She has a pulse and she's breathing. She's gonna need some stitches, but she's fine."

Troy's eyes welled up and he looked at her again. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Troy." Wyatt clapped his hands on his shoulders. "You're all fine now."

"And my stuff?" He looked around frantically. "From the shipwreck... we brought up some things from the..."

"Easy, big guy." Wyatt nodded to the back of the plane.

Troy turned and saw that the contents of the basket had been piled up on an extra blanket; rusty and barnacled and wholly indistinguishable as anything of value. He slumped back into his seat.



GENE WATCHED as the yellow seaplane splashed down. Troy was the only one able to exit the plane under his own power. Bill carried the others. After some minor treatment for their dehydration and exposure, they slept.



TROY'S DREAMS came vividly and broke him into a feverish sweat. He stood at the wheel of a massive clipper ship. Everything was black, the wood, the iron, the steel. Even black sails whipped in the wind above him. Megan stood to his right and R.B. to his left. Neither spoke at all. He was horrified to see their eyes were rolled back in their heads. They were clearly dead.

Señora de la Muerta, the Lady of the Dead, crashed through black waves. A dark and electric cloud swirled above the ship and began spinning and curling in a hurricane spiral. Voices screamed at him to turn the ship around.

"Never!" he yelled, "I will bring this ship through the storm!"

He heard nothing but booming evil laughter. The violent wind ripped the sails and cracked the masts. Splintering wood and rigging crashed all around them, but neither Megan nor R.B. moved. Suddenly, he saw a floating form drift out of the swirling clouds toward them. It was some sort of wraith or witch in a flowing black veil.

“How dare you disturb the dead,” she screeched at him.

He stood terrified at the horrible apparition before him. She reached out and pointed at R.B. Suddenly, he slumped and fell to the deck.

“No!” Troy dropped to his knees beside him. “What have you done to him?”

“I did nothing,” she said. “You have brought them to their fate aboard the *Lady of the Dead*.”

She slowly turned toward Megan, still staring out into the blackness around them. She raised her finger to point at her.

“NOOO!!” Troy jumped at the wraith and grabbed at the black cloth swirling around her head.

His hands felt like he’d dipped them into ice water, but he could feel the veil in his grip. He ripped it off her head.

She screamed and reeled back from him. To his utter shock and horror, he recognized the face. Though it was blue and veined and covered with seaweed, he knew her. It was Natasha.

“No...” he gasped, tears welling in his eyes.

Troy Bodean jerked his eyes open and sat up.

“Oh, my God.” He put his head in his hands and cried.

“Natasha, I’m so sorry.”

“You gonna be okay?” a voice rasped from the next bed.

Troy looked over. R.B. was propped up on his elbow.

“Yeah,” he answered, shaking off the dream. “Megan?”

“Don’t know. I haven’t been out of bed. Still can’t muster the energy yet.”

Troy nodded and swung his legs over the edge and rested his feet on the cold steel floor.

“I’m gonna go see what’s going on.”

“Hey,” R.B. said, and lay back down, “bring me a beer, will ya?”

Troy laughed as he forced his legs to pick him up. “You bet.”



MEGAN SIMONS WAS LYING in George Wyatt’s bed. Her breathing was shallow and her skin was pale. Wyatt was sitting at his desk.

“You’ve all been out for about six hours now.”

Troy nodded toward Megan. “How is she?”

“She hasn’t come around yet,” he said. “I think she lost a lot of blood from that nasty cut.”

Troy knelt down beside the bed and touched her forehead. A bandage oozed over the cut she’d gotten from the exploding glass on the *Wy Knott*.

“She’s gonna need stitches and antibiotics, Troy.” George stood up.

“We need to get all three of you to a hospital on the island.”

Troy nodded. “Thank you, Wyatt,” he said, his voice quivering.

“What for?”

“For coming out there to find us.”

George opened the door. “Find you?” he said, laughing. “I was just looking for my damn boat!”

Troy could hear his laughter echo down the steel hallways of the oil rig.

“I’m gonna fire up that plane of yours, and get you lazy bums back to the island,” he called.

Nice Nap

Troy Bodean stared blankly at the doctor who was explaining the micro-stitches in Megan Simons' forehead. He was going on about how they weren't really necessary, but that they would keep the scar fairly invisible. Troy didn't care; he just wanted to make sure she was going to be fine.

"Yes, Mr. Bodean," the doctor continued, "she's going to be okay."

He thanked the man and walked back into the hospital room where Megan was sleeping. She had an I.V. in her arm and her face was ashen. Her lips were cracked and glistened with lip balm. Her hair was freshly washed and still slightly wet. He sat down heavily in the vinyl visitor chair and watched her breathe, nearly in sync with the heart rate beeping lightly in the background.

Even in this disheveled state he was amazed he still found her incredibly beautiful.

Sunlight beamed through the sterile vertical blinds of the Lower Keys Medical Center. Hurricane Daniel had passed, but somehow he felt they were not out of the storm yet. He'd pretty much bet the farm on finding treasure in the sunken ship but all they really had to show for their struggle at sea were some rusty bits of junk. He wondered if it would even be worth enough to pay for Megan's hospital bill. *Probably not*, he thought, *I'm sure micro-stitches aren't cheap*.

Troy stood up and walked over to the bed. Tipping his hat back on his... *Holy Moly*, he thought as he realized the hat had survived the hurricane too. He brushed his fingers lightly over Megan's cheek.

"Guess I'll sell the scooter," he mumbled aloud, "and the houseboat."

To his surprise, Megan opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "You call that rusty bucket of bolts a houseboat?"

He was surprised again to feel tears begin streaming down his cheeks.

"I thought sailors didn't cry," she rasped through a laugh.

He smiled. "They don't. I'm a pilot."

She laughed again and began to cough. He handed her an impossibly small paper cup of tepid water. She drank it down quickly and he filled it up again from a nearby sink five times before she was satisfied.

She closed her eyes and was asleep again. He watched her for a while, but then fatigue caught up with him. He slumped into the cold hard chair and drifted off.

He woke to find the sun throwing long orange rays between the blinds. He rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“Nice nap?”

He looked up to find Megan sitting upright in bed. She looked pale but not as ashen as before; even her lips seemed to be less swollen and blistered.

“I got tired of waiting up on you!” he said, and stretched his arms out like a cat who’d just been roused from a warm spot in the sun.

He heaved himself up and felt the aches and pains of their ocean swim needle into his muscles. The stiff hospital guest chair probably hadn’t done much for him either.

Troy walked to her bedside and took her hand in his. For a few minutes, he couldn’t find the words to express what he’d been feeling.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he finally whispered.

Megan smiled. “Pfftt, you think a boat ride through shark infested waters, rogue waves and gale force winds are enough to get rid of me?”

He was suddenly choked up again and couldn’t speak.

“You won’t shake me that easily, Troy Bodean.”

He stared into her eyes and struggled to regain his composure. She pulled him down into a hug.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere,” she whispered into his ear.

Later in his life, when he looked back on this moment, he would tell the story of how he might not have pulled any gold or silver from the Gulf of Mexico, but that he’d found treasure just the same.

“What happened out there, Troy?” she asked. “I remember the explosion, but that’s about it.”

He told her what had transpired from the time she was unconscious until now.

“Natasha?”

He just shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Troy.”

After a long pause she added. “What was she doing there anyway?”

“I don’t think we’ll ever know that.”

“R.B.?”

“Waiting for us back at my place to tell him what to do with the

junk we brought up from the *Muerta*.”

“You mean the houseboat?” she said, winking at him.

“Very funny.”

“We can take it back up to the research center. I can probably get everything we need there to examine the pieces. It may not be much, but I bet we can find something a local museum might buy to put on display.”

“Sounds good, but the doc said you can’t leave ‘til tomorrow morning. He wants to make sure that cut doesn’t get infected.”

Megan looked exasperated, but soon relented. “Well, call him and tell him to go ahead and take all of it up to the center. It really needs to be soaked in salt water to keep it from decaying and falling apart on us.”

“Gotcha,” Troy said as he clicked open his phone.

He relayed the instructions to R.B. and sat back down in the chair. Megan then used his phone to call Chelsea, her assistant at the research center, and told her to prepare three large tubs of salt water for storing the artifacts. Troy almost laughed out loud when she said *artifacts*.

Megan smiled a sideways smile, and said, “You know, sometimes things might not look so good on the outside, but if you clean ‘em up and give ‘em a little attention... you might be surprised what you’ve found.”

“I should’ve known you were an optimist,” Troy said through a smirk.

“And you’re not?”

He began to refute her assessment but was startled to find he was beginning to feel a little better about what might lay ahead. In fact, he was anxious to get out of the hospital and start cleaning up their rusty finds.

“Maybe I am,” he said, winking, “maybe I am.”



RYAN BODEAN, or R.B. as he was widely known on the island of Key West, rapped on the glass security door to the Dolphin Research Center. *Good grief*, he thought, annoyed at having to make the long drive up by himself. He was anxious to unload the unimpressive bounty and get back down to Duval Street for a well-deserved beer. After a long wait, the girl named Chelsea finally opened the door.

“Sorry, I was...”

He didn’t hear the rest of what she was saying. She was stunningly beautiful. She had deep black hair and the greenest eyes he’d ever seen. A few freckles dotted her nose, an occupational hazard from

being in the sun, he guessed.

“Hi, I’m R.B., a... a friend of Megan’s and Troy’s,” he stammered.

She blushed slightly at his stare. “I know, I was expecting you.”

“Well, I sure wasn’t expecting you... I mean, wait... I didn’t expect you to be so... crap, nevermind.”

She laughed. “C’mon, I think we should probably get that pile of junk into the salt water tubs.” She nodded toward his beat-up Chevy pick-up truck. “And then you can take me up to Woody’s for a beer.”

He was suddenly not so anxious to get back to Key West.

Needles And Pins

Joe Bond and Steve Haney pulled into the Sunset Marina for the third time in a week. It was the marina the Key West police department used for their own boat storage.

“Déjà vu all over again, eh,” Steve said as they exited the cruiser.

“Okay, now,” Joe warned him, “no coming down on the kid, agreed?”

Steve just shrugged an innocent shrug. He’d recently gotten a bit hot under the collar at the nonchalance of the hippie kid working the desk at the marina.

“I want to find Hector’s boat and get the inspection team on it.”

Joe walked up to the desk. “Hector Martinez? Which one is his?”

The kid never looked up from an old issue of the High Times. “Thirty-two.”

Steve glared but said nothing. Joe urged him on from behind. As they walked along the slips toward Hector’s boat, Steve slowed.

“What?” Joe asked, nearly bumping into him.

“Notice anything strange?”

Joe looked around at the boats, all of them hanging above the water on lifts—except for one.

“Well, I guess they pulled them all out because of the storm.”

“Which means that one,” —Steve pointed to the boat still sitting in the water— “came in after the storm hit.”

“Get the kid; find out who owns it.”

“Gladly.”

“Be nice,” Joe said over his shoulder.

He continued down to slip number thirty-two. The boat was hanging above the water, put up for the storm. Joe pulled the lever to lower it.

When it came to rest, he climbed aboard. He tried the key he’d found on Hector and sure enough, the boat fired up. He started the onboard G.P.S. unit and found that Hector had indeed been to Cuba and back a few times.

He continued to scroll through the locations and came to one he recognized immediately. Fort Jefferson.

“Now, what in the hell is Hector doing out there?”

He remembered Steve saying the man had begged not to be taken to an evil place and that the man at the fort had told him all about it. There was only one man stationed at Fort Jefferson. James Howard. Joe didn’t know James very well, but he hardly seemed the type to instill fear into Hector.

He poked around the boat and eventually found several bags of white powder beneath the rear seat; drugs, probably cocaine or heroin.

Joe Bond sat back in the captain’s chair of Hector’s boat. He struggled to put all of these seemingly random pieces into place. He took out a notepad and began scratching out a flow chart of pieces with lines between them representing any connection they may have.

Hector is running drugs; he’s stopped at Fort Jefferson. He cocked his head to the side in a moment of inspiration, clicked open his cellphone, and dialed Ashleigh at the C.I.A. on her *secure* line.

“Hello, Joe,” she answered.

“I need another favor,” he said, scribbling notes again.

“Okay, I’ll do my best.”

“Check these two names, please,” —he spelled each one out— “J-A-M-E-S H-O-W-A-R-D and N-A-T-A-S-H-A W-A-I-N-W-R-I-G-H-T.”

She repeated them back to him as she clicked on a computer keyboard. “Hmmm, that’s odd.”

“What is it?” Joe asked.

“Natasha is registered in the official dossier, but she has no assignments listed.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well... I don’t know,” she replied, “but James is listed as released. He doesn’t work for the C.I.A. anymore.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Joe mumbled.

“What did you want with them?”

“They both work at Fort Jefferson here in the Keys.”

Ashleigh paused for a second. “That’s odd... neither has any kind of listing for that job.”

Joe scratched the stubble on top of his head. “Looks like I need to make a trip out there to get some answers.”

“I’ll do some cross-referencing here and see what I can find out.” Ashleigh clicked some more keys. “But Joe... please be careful. According to what I see here, they’re both agents, or at least prior agents.”

“Will do,” he said, and scribbled C.I.A. next to their names on his notepad. “Thanks a million.”

He clicked his phone shut and looked at what he had written. Hector is running drugs; he's stopped at Fort Jefferson. James Howard (former C.I.A.) and Natasha Wainwright (C.I.A.) are stationed at Fort Jefferson without the agency's knowledge.

He tapped his pencil on the page. Someone is coming down on Hector for some reason and that someone is stationed at Fort Jefferson to keep an eye on him. *But why?*

"Yo Boss," Steve yelled across the marina, "you gotta come check this out."

Joe folded the notepad and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He climbed out of Hector's boat and walked a few slips down to where Steve was sitting in the mysteriously un-raised vessel. It was a much nicer boat, with a high fishing tower and a well-appointed cabin for sleeping underneath.

As Joe approached, Steve said, "It belongs to Vince Pinzioni; he is *the* current owner of Captain Tony's."

"Yeah, I know who he is," Joe said as he climbed down into the cabin, "but what would he be doing out in that storm?"

"I dunno, but check this out." Steve held up a plastic evidence bag. Inside was what looked to be a medicine vial similar to those used to fill hypodermic needles, three red feathered darts, and an air gun.

"What's in the bottle?" Joe asked, taking the bag from Steve.

"No label."

Joe rubbed his chin and looked up at his partner, "did you check the G.P.S.?"

Steve shook his head.

"Why not? Seems like standard operating procedure around this island these days."

Steve shrugged as they made their way back to the upper deck. Joe clicked on the unit and, as he had done hundreds of times this week, he scrolled through the most recently logged destinations.

He clicked on the last one listed.

"Fort Jefferson?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Joe said as he stood up, "they've been getting a lot of visitors lately."

"Huh?"

"And after we get this stuff to the lab," —Joe shook the evidence bag with the air gun and darts— "we're gonna pay them a visit to find out why."

Bill Bane coasted the newly purchased thirty-seven-meter ocean-going support tug to a smooth stop under the *Wyatt 1*. He didn't ask questions about where his boss, George Wyatt, had gotten the three million to buy it, nor did he ask questions about how Warren International Ltd. had acquired such a boat so quickly. Through normal procedures, it could take anywhere from twelve months to two years to make such an acquisition.

He simply admired the boat, and took the helm. Bill was only too happy to be back from Key West, where they'd dropped off the three survivors of a shipwreck at the hands of Hurricane Daniel; Megan Simons, and Ryan and Troy Bodean. They had been aboard the original tug, the *Wy Knott*, investigating some sort of shipwreck Troy had discovered, when their tracking beacon suddenly stopped. The amazingly detailed sonar signature that the *Wyatt 1*'s sophisticated machinery had produced when they lost the beacon suggested a lightning strike or an onboard explosion.

They learned after rescuing the nearly drowned crew of three survivors that someone had been shooting at them and had ignited and exploded an onboard fuel tank that was almost empty.

Bill and Wyatt discovered them floating on rescued debris from Troy's Spanish Galleon, the *Señora De La Muerta*, and the *Wy Knott* was now on the seabed of the gulf with her.

Bill clapped Wyatt's shoulder as they started to climb the steps up to the oil rig's platform. "She's a nice boat, boss."

"Thanks, Bill," Wyatt said, and stopped and looked back at the tug, "and fast as shit, too."

Bill held out his meaty hand palm up, and said, "Watcha gone call this one?"

"The way things are going around here," he said, smiling crookedly, "I may call her the *Titanic II*."

"Naw," —Bill shook his head— "I was thinkin' something more like... the *Wyatt Load*."

Wyatt chuckled. “Wyatt Load it is, my friend.”

Bill watched as his boss and friend stared back at the massive boat. He seemed quiet and even melancholy as they sailed back to the oil rig. It was the resignation of a man ready to throw in the towel.

“We pulled three people from the water today, boss,” Bill said quietly, “That’s gotta count for somethin’, don’t it?”

Wyatt turned toward him and nodded.

“Karma’s a strange thing,” Bill said, and held out a hand, “and today, we bought ourselves some good. The sun is shining, and soon it’s gonna shine on us, boss.”

“I sure hope so, Bill.”

They climbed the rest of the stairs in silence, the only sound the clanging of their footsteps on the steel stairs and the water slapping against the pylons far below.

When they finally opened the submarine style door and entered Gene’s control room, the hefty man was hunched over a sheaf of printouts with a magnifying glass. He didn’t look up.

“We’re back, Gene.”

He still didn’t look up.

“Gene, buddy... what’s up?” Bill asked a little louder.

Still no reply, as the man continued to study the papers, tracing a finger along them and muttering to himself.

Wyatt walked over and rapped his fist on the table in door-knocking urgency.

“Hellooooo,” he called into the hunched man’s ear, “anybody home???”

Gene looked up suddenly, startled that he wasn’t still alone.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” he started. “Hey guys. When did you get back?”

Bill and Wyatt exchanged glances.

“Well, we just got in, but we radioed an hour ago telling you we were coming!” Wyatt began to smile. “I knew you loved that sonar, but wow, that takes the cake.”

“You don’t understand,” Gene said and grinned like a kid on Christmas Eve. “You have no idea what this thing can do.”

Wyatt laughed and Bill just rolled his eyes and sat down at the table.

“Actually, I know quite well what it can do.” Wyatt stepped over to a nearby counter and poured himself a not-so-fresh cup of coffee.

He didn’t mention that the C.I.A. had provided the sophisticated sonar to him as a means of keeping an eye on the waters around Cuba. He didn’t think the waters around Cuba were that important, but apparently, someone at the C.I.A. did. Only much later would he learn that someone at the highest levels of the C.I.A. was using the data he was providing to his covert contact, Stingray, to look for something

very important on the floor of the gulf.

“Okay, look at this.” Gene pulled out the familiar printout of the moment they lost the *Wy Knott*.

“Yes, yes, very impressive,” Wyatt said and moved closer to the table, sipping his coffee.

“But look,” —Gene flipped the page back to reveal a similar image, but something was different— “I found a function that allowed me to see three dimensionally... below the gulf’s bed.”

“What do you mean?” Wyatt looked closer at the page.

“This is a picture of the next five hundred feet down,” Gene said and tapped the table, “and this...” He paused and flipped another page. It was dramatically different. It looked as if a black hole had been drawn in the center of the grid. “... is the next five hundred feet.”

Wyatt’s mouth dropped open. “What is that?”

Gene stood up and went over to a nearby computer keyboard. “It’s under a salt bed.” He turned to look at them as the computer screen resolved into an almost photographic three-dimensional rendering of the printouts they were looking at. “It appears to be a reservoir.”

“A reservoir?” George was stunned. “A reservoir in less than sixty feet of water?”

“Yup.” Gene tapped the screen. “And it looks huge.”

“How huge?” Bill stood up to get a closer look at the monitor.

“Troika huge,” Gene said in a whisper.

“Holy mother of...” Bill just blinked at the screen.

George Wyatt fainted.

An Odd Bowl

Shortly after her release from the Lower Keys Medical Center at

sunrise, Megan Simons arrived at the Dolphin Research Center to find R.B. and Chelsea huddled together, asleep, or more accurately passed out, on a lobby couch.

She shook her head and walked back to the lab. Troy had gone to see if anything was left of his beloved houseboat, but she was excited to get to work on the items they had recovered from the shipwreck before they'd been...

She suddenly stumbled in her thoughts. So much had happened that she hadn't stopped to fully appreciate the fact they'd been shot at; someone had been willing to commit murder to get their hands on that shipwreck... or to keep them from bringing anything up.

It was a chilling thought, one she would have to discuss with Troy later, but it also piqued her curiosity. What had they found that would inspire someone to kill them? Surely gold or silver alone wouldn't be enough for that.

She clicked on the fluorescent lights in the lab to find that Chelsea had done a good job preparing the items in a saltwater bath to keep them from decomposing. At first glance, most of them appeared to be metal objects, rusted and heavily barnacled. She would have to be extremely careful not to damage them in cleaning.

Megan opened a cabinet and prepared a solution of dissolved chlorides and sulfates to saturate the artifacts. She randomly picked up an item from one of the saltwater tubs and dipped it into the solution. Amazingly, this particular artifact did not crumble under her tongs. She continued to move the pieces into the new solution. It would take some time for the chemicals to evaporate and leave behind semi-clean pieces. She then planned to use electrolysis and perhaps some other chemical baths to further remove salt and smaller debris.

She decided to get some breakfast while giving the solutions time to do their work. She exited the lab and clicked off the lights.

As she walked into the lobby, Chelsea stirred and looked up

through groggy eyes. "Oh, hey," she said, suddenly awkward and shy.

"Don't mind me," Megan said with a wink, "I'm just heading down to the Seven Mile Grill for something to eat."

R.B. raised his head quickly. "Ahhh, that sounds terrific."

"Sheesh," Megan said, sighing. "Okay, you've got five minutes to get ready."

R.B. flipped his Tortuga Adventures cap over his tousled blonde hair. "Heck, I'm ready now!"

Chelsea shrugged and stood up. "Yeah, me too, I guess."

Ten minutes later, R.B. was drooling over the three egg omelets listed with various combinations of unhealthy ingredients. Megan ordered her usual; fresh fruit and a bagel. Chelsea laughed at her and ordered French toast with apple topping. R.B. ordered the same, plus a Keys Omelets with ham, tomato, peppers, onions, cheese and potatoes.

"Hungry?" Megan raised an eyebrow.

"What?" he smiled sheepishly. "I haven't eaten a decent meal since before..." He stopped short.

"I know," she said, nodded.

An awkward silence fell over their plastic outdoor patio breakfast table.

"So, how 'bout those Seminoles," Chelsea chimed, in trying to change the subject.

The horror of their experiences from the last few days was still fresh.

"You know," Megan said, ignoring the dark-haired intern, "I've been wondering about something."

"What's that?" R.B. doodled with his finger on the table.

"Who shot at us?"

He stopped doodling and looked up at her. "I've been wondering that too. I mean, who could have—"

The waitress interrupted them, setting their food on the table. As she left, he continued his thought.

"... who could have known where we were?" He sat up a little straighter. "We didn't tell anyone where we were going."

"Maybe you were followed." Chelsea didn't look up and took a bite of her French toast.

Megan and R.B. stared at her and said nothing.

"What?" She realized they had stopped talking. "Well, that only makes sense... right?"

R.B. looked at Megan. "She's got a point."

"They could've followed us," —Megan tapped her fork on her plate — "or they could've followed Natasha."

R.B. nodded in agreement. "But who?"

"I don't know," Megan said, "but whoever it was probably thinks

we're dead."

"We need to lay low until we know what's going on here."

She nodded and put her fork down. "I'm not really hungry anymore."

"Yeah, me neither." R.B. slouched back in his chair.

Chelsea looked at Megan and then back at R.B. while chewing on a bite of apple. "Well, heck. I still am!"



AFTER DROPPING Chelsea off at her apartment, R.B. returned Megan to the research center, then headed back to Key West, leaving Megan to finish her work on the artifacts. He promised he would keep Troy out of trouble; Megan was sure that was an empty promise, but she didn't see much she could do about it.

Megan clicked on the lights in the lab. She was pleasantly surprised to see that some of the items were readily identifiable. Many were even showing metallic luster and looked pretty well intact.

She carefully pulled an item from the chemical bath with the tongs and laid it on a soft pad on the table. It was an iron cup, and it was fairly ordinary. Something she'd long since pushed to the back of her mind resurfaced; what did a ship carrying the dead need with an iron cup... clearly not the cup of the wealthy. The crew on board would've sipped from bottles of rum.

She shook her head and put the cup down on the pad to continue drying. She turned her attention to the biggest piece they had recovered. It appeared to be a bowl about ten-inches deep and it was heavy, maybe thirty pounds.

It hadn't fared as well as the cup. It was badly corroded and had several holes in it. It had an odd loop in the bottom that was broken, maybe an attachment for mixing the bowl's contents; another odd find for a boat full of dead people. There were a few markings on the side, but they were indistinct, probably just scratches from the disaster that must have sunk the ship.

She sat it down on another pad and had trouble getting it to sit upright. Finally, she gave up and let it rest gently on its side. She turned back toward the tubs and took out a new piece, another cup, she thought.

When she went to place this new one on the table, she stopped suddenly and dropped the cup. It clanged to the floor, but she didn't even watch it as it rolled around noisily. From this distance, she realized that the large object she'd just cleaned was no bowl at all. It was a bell; she'd been holding it upside down. She ran back to the table and turned it right side up. The indistinct markings suddenly

became an inscription.

“Oh, my God,” she said out loud.

She frantically flipped open her phone and dialed Troy.

Don't Lose Your Head

Joe Bond steered the Key West P.D.'s new Nimbus 250 Nova R westward toward Fort Jefferson. The wind was dying down and a brighter shade of gray was forcing its way through the stinging mist hitting him in the face. Once again, his island town had survived a brush with devastation. Hurricane Daniel had climbed to a category two storm, which meant evacuations and such, not to mention flooding and major property damage. But the warm waters of the gulf had pulled it farther west, missing the island altogether.

Steve Haney, his partner, rode beside him in silence and gripping his orange poncho hood tighter around his neck. He stood when the fort finally rose up on the horizon and pointed.

"Got it," Joe nodded.

He pulled the boat up to a small pier and Steve hopped out to tie it off. He noticed the fort's resident boat pulled up on the sand nearby... an odd way for it to be parked.

Joe pointed to it. "Check that out."

"Roger that," Steve said, and carefully picked his way across the damp beach toward the boat.

Joe put his hands on his hips and looked up at the high brick walls of the fort. He looked around trying to get the lay of the land. It certainly was an imposing sight.

He made his way up the path toward the fort, holding the railing to keep his balance on the wet and slippery stones. He stumbled slightly once and had to stop as the jarring sent a sharp pain into his back.

"Oh, Damn," he gasped as his ancient wound stabbed him, taking his breath away.

He raised his hand from the rail to wipe the beads of sweat from his forehead and noticed the slightest trace of red on his fingers. He sniffed it and immediately recognized the coppery smell of blood. He gingerly knelt to get a closer look. There were definitely a few dried blood droplets. Someone had come through here with a cut after the

storm had passed. He had three possibilities in mind; James Howard, Natasha Wainwright or Vince Pinzioni. All had apparently been here within the last day or two. He made a mental note to get a sample on his way back.

His shoes clicked loudly against the new concrete floor as he entered the fort.

"Hello?" he called into the dark hallway.

Nothing. He suddenly felt something seemed off, and un-holstered his gun. He slowly made his way through the massive stone arches toward what the rangers here called the *back of the house*. Nothing was on, no lights, no fans, nothing. As he moved closer to the rangers' quarters he heard a faint whirring sound and could see a dim flicker from below one of the bunker doors.

"Hello?" he called again.

He inched his way toward the door, his breath becoming shallow. It was just this sort of moment that panicked him into remembering that day in the New York alley. It was a cold fear that somehow made his back ache, as if the bullet left in his spine was made of ice. He leaned against the wall next to the door and knocked. The sound echoed loudly down the hall.

Nothing, no response, no sound, no movement of any kind. He reached over and slowly turned the knob. When he felt it click, he flung the door open wide and stormed in, gun pointed in front. The smell was acrid and filled the dark room. He could barely see that a computer was running, which explained the whirring sound and the flickering light of a screensaver. His hand fumbled around on the wall before finding the overhead light switch.

When his eyes finally adjusted to the suddenly fluorescent room, the horrible scene made him turn away. James Howard, one of the park rangers (and apparently C.I.A. agent), was slumped over in his chair. Gore and blood were spattered against the wall behind him and his neck was a gaping wound.

Joe grimaced at the scene as he clicked open his cellphone. "Jill, it's Joe, we're gonna need a full C.S.I. team out to Fort Jefferson."

He noted the gun still dangling from James' hand, and added, "Possible suicide, maybe homicide... at any rate, we've got a body."

He closed his phone and moved closer to the bloody desk. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully shuffled the mouse around a bit and waited for the computer screen to come back to life. As he did, he accidentally nudged the ranger's chair and his head lolled to one side, spilling more blood from the hole in his neck.

"Oh, God." Joe cringed.

Oddly, there were bruises on the lower part of James' jaw. His mouth fell open with the movement and Joe caught a glimpse of

something strange there as well; a tiny bit of flesh was hanging from one of the ranger's teeth. Joe leaned over to get a closer look.

"Hey!" a voice called from behind him.

Joe whirled around, drew his gun, and ducked behind the desk.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Steve Haney shouted and threw his hands in the air, "it's just me, it's just me, don't shoot!"

"Jeezus Criminy," Joe gasped, and lowered his gun, "you scared the shit out of me."

Steve didn't answer, suddenly stunned by the brutal bloody scene in front of him.

"What the..."

"Yeah, I dunno." Joe holstered his gun and stood up. "A team is on the way to check it out."

Steve didn't move. A fine sweat popped up on his brow and his face went pale.

"Alright!" Joe jumped up and moved toward him. "If you're gonna throw up, leave the room."

Steve shook his head and seemed to regain his composure. "Nah, I'm fine."

Joe stared at him until he was sure the big man wasn't going to be sick. He pulled a notepad out and jotted down a few things for the C.S.I. team that was on the way: *check outside railing and possible DNA sample from victim's teeth.*

"Wow," Steve said, now seemingly back to himself, "what in God's name happened?"

"Well, as you can see, he shot himself," —Joe motioned to the desk — "but he's struggled with someone and possibly bit them."

Steve just stared at the body.

"Anyway, there's a lot of evidence and we—"

Joe was interrupted by a chirp from James' pocket. He looked at Steve.

The big man shrugged. "Cellphone?"

Joe went around behind the desk and realized that the sound hadn't come from his pocket, but his lap. A cellphone was lying in between his legs, propped open and blinking with a new message. Joe picked it up with his handkerchief and tapped one of the buttons. The screen had a one word text:

-REPORT.

Joe wrapped the phone in the cloth and stuck it in his pocket. "We'll check that out later," he said. "Let's get back to the boat."

"Oh, by the way, about the boat," —his partner seemed to snap back to life— "I found something interesting." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a baggie containing three rifle shells. "Somebody's been shootin' at something."

Joe nodded back at the desk. “Seems that’s going around.”

That’s when he noticed the rifle propped up against the side of the desk. “What the hell?”

Steve shrugged. “You’ve got me, man.”

Megan Simons could hardly keep from gasping as she waited

for Troy to answer his phone. Two rings, three... no answer.

"Dammit, Troy," she said, and waited for his voicemail. "Call me back, it's important."

She hung up and turned her attention back to the bell they'd brought up from the bottom of the gulf. It was most certainly a ship's bell, but it didn't belong to the *Señora de la Muerta*. The inscription on the inside of the bell was clear.

She continued to clean it gently. Though badly corroded, she could still make out what appeared to be two round holes about the size of a quarter on one side and a crack connecting them. The bottom lip of the bell was badly distorted on the opposite side. It looked like melted chocolate. She polished the inscription with a swab and read it again; it was right there, no doubt about it.

She picked up her phone to dial Troy again but stopped short. The puzzle pieces she had in her hands didn't fit together. She clicked open her laptop and waited for it to connect to the wireless broadband. She opened a browser and googled a few key words.

"Haiti," she muttered to herself, "this thing is supposed to be near Haiti."

Opening a few more browser windows only proved to be even more mysterious although somehow enlightening as to why it might not have finally rested in Haiti.

She was startled by her phone beeping loudly. Glancing at the caller I.D., she saw it was Troy.

"Hey you," he said.

"Troy, listen," —she was borderline hysterical— "you are not going to believe this."

"Okay," he said slowly, "what is it?"

"This stuff isn't from the *Señora de la Muerta*." She paused.

"Dangit!"

"No no," she continued, "it's even better than that."

"Better than tons of silver and gold?"

"Yes."

"Well...?"

"Troy, I don't know how to tell you this," —she could feel her heart pounding— "but you've found the wreck of the Santa Maria."

For a long minute, he said nothing.

"The Santa Maria," he said, "as in, Christopher Columbus's ship that sailed the ocean blue in 1492."

"Yup," she answered, "that's the one."

"Wait, that can't be right," he finally said. "The Santa Maria didn't go down there. She ran aground off the coast of Haiti. And besides that, most of the salvaged material from the ship was supposedly used to build a colony there."

"I know that, but I'm telling you, Troy," —she motioned toward the bell, though he couldn't see it— "I'm looking at the inscription right now."

"What does it say?"

"*La Gallega*," she read, "and underneath that, *Juan de la Cosa*."

"Okay... um, I'm lost."

"Well, that's the original name of the Santa Maria and her owner," she said, laughing. "I can't believe it. This is so much more important than anything we could have ever found on the Muerta!"

She could almost hear him shaking his head on the other end of the phone. "I still don't get what it's doing at the bottom of the gulf at Key West."

"I don't know either. Maybe a storm or current carried it here," she said, "but it doesn't really matter. Aren't you excited?"

"Well, yeah. Yes, I am; that's great news," —he didn't sound convinced— "but listen, stay right there, I'm on my way. Be there in an hour."

"Troy, trust me. This is the wreck of the Santa Maria," she said. "It doesn't make any difference how it got here; you found it!"

"I guess you're right," he said. "I'm sure there's some reason for it."

He paused for a moment and she could tell he must've thought she was mistaken.

"Anyway, you just sit tight and wait for me."

"I will... bye."

She clicked her phone shut and turned to look at the bell. It was kind of odd for it to show up like this. She tilted it back upright and polished it gently. *Funny how uniform these two holes are*, she thought, and traced a finger along the melted portion of the edge of the bell. *Melted portion?*

The more she studied it, the more she became convinced this bell had seen some sort of battle: two holes from a musket or something,

and a melted edge from some intense heat, maybe a fire.

But nothing like that ever happened on the Santa Maria, she thought.

“Or did it?” she muttered to herself. She turned back to her computer and clicked back to a few of the web pages she had opened.

“Cristóbal Colón,” Megan read to herself, “born in the Republic of Genoa, started sailing at ten, blah blah blah.”

She scrolled down to the details of the fateful voyage of 1492.

“Hmmm...” She traced her finger along the screen. “First petitioned John the Second, turned down. Second petitioned Henry the Seventh of England via his brother, turned down... already committed to Spain.”

She skipped down to the portion that revealed that Ferdinand the Second of Aragon and Isabella the First of Castile had finally awarded him the right to make the voyage, though it was mostly private financial backing that made it possible. He was to be made Admiral of the Seas and given an unusually large portion of the profits.

“Strange,” she muttered.

After reading further, she discovered that most scholars thought this large percentage of reward was probably given, thinking that he would never return from the voyage.

“Ah,” she said, nodding, “makes sense.”

She continued to read information about the ships and the first voyage. The *Santa Maria* was owned by Juan de la Cosa; she nodded toward the bell. The *Niña* and the *Pinta* were owned by Martín Alonso Pinzón and Vincente Yáñez Pinzón, who coincidentally captained these two ships on the voyage.

“Hmmm, brothers,” she said aloud, “I never knew that.”

She read further, and learned that most historians agreed the journeys of Columbus involving the Pinzón brothers were not happy ones. Many reports showed them to be mutinous, to the point of leaving Columbus and striking out on their own as they approached the *New World*. Martín Alonso Pinzón had apparently heard from a native guide that there was much gold on the island of *Babeque*, and left the convoy of ships without permission to find it.

“Never knew that either.”

The more she read, the more it became clear there was no love between the captains of the three famous ships.

She clicked open a new page and was stunned by what she read. “Fierce storms separated the ships on their return to Palos from the newly discovered lands. Each captain, Martín Alonso Pinzón and Christopher Columbus, believed the other to be lost at sea. Pinzón arrived shortly after Columbus to find that he was being hailed a hero. Pinzón, expecting to be similarly exalted, found the honor already proclaimed on Columbus. Bitterly angry and jealous, he died alone

under mysterious circumstances just days later.”

She sat back in the chair at her desk. “Weird.”

Rubbing her eyes and stretching her arms over her head, she found herself amazed at how little she really knew about these incredibly famous ships and their captains.

She looked back at the bell. “So, we’ve got a couple of mutinous brothers on the Pinta and the Niña and a battle-scarred bell from the Santa Maria...”

She stopped short. Sitting up quickly she scrolled back to the webpage concerning their return from the New World.

She scrolled through the pages until she found the sentence she was looking for; *he died alone under mysterious circumstances just days later.*

On a hunch, she clicked back to Google and typed in Christopher Columbus’s body.

One million, eight hundred thousand results came back in less than two-tenths of a second. Of the first ten or so, all seemed to have the same theme. Apparently, Christopher Columbus’s body had been moved several times and its exact location was under much contention.

Spain claimed to have it and the Dominican Republic (or Hispaniola in Columbus’s day) also claimed to have his bones.

Megan Simons, whose mind was well suited for analyzing information of this nature, took out a pad of paper and jotted down the facts.

1. Three Ships leave Spain for the new world
2. Christopher Columbus captains the Santa Maria
3. Martín Alonso Pinzón captains the Pinta
4. Vincente Yáñez Pinzón captains the Niña
5. The Pinzón brothers are heavy investors in the voyage
6. The Pinzón brothers are widely regarded as mutinous
7. Two ships return from the New World; the Pinta and the Niña
8. Christopher Columbus’s bones might be in the Dominican Republic

“THREE SHIPS LEAVE for the New World and only two come back,” she said aloud.

She looked at the broken, melted bell again. “They sunk her,” — she sat back slowly in her chair— “and probably killed Columbus and left his bones in the Dominican Republic.”

“Oh, my God,” she gasped. “What have we uncovered here?”

THE CONVERSATION WAS METICULOUSLY RECORDED, saved and delivered via secure hard-line e-mail to the man sitting in a large office at the top of the glass tower. His computer pinged to let him know he'd received the communiqué. Gently tapping the end of a lit cigar on the granite ashtray at the corner of his desk, he opened the file. He listened quietly as the two voices rose out of his computer speakers:

"Troy, I don't know how to tell you this, but you've found the wreck of the Santa Maria."

"The Santa Maria," the male voice said, "As in, Christopher Columbus's ship that sailed the ocean blue in 1492."

"Yup, that's the one."

The man in the high-backed leather desk chair swiveled around and opened his cellphone. He scrolled down through the numbers and tapped out a message. He pressed the send button and waited. It wasn't long before he had a response.

Part III



1492

“Following the light of the sun, we left the Old World.”

-Christopher Columbus

Between The Bars

“W oohooooo,” Troy Bodean howled as he held up two

Coronas above his Outback Tea Stained Cowboy hat and winked at the girls dancing on the bar at Durty Harry’s on Duval Street. The Durt Bags (the house band) were on stage and growling out their best imitation of Poison, singing “*Nothin’ but a Good Time*.” The Jello shots were flowing and the beers were ice cold.

He almost never came up to this touristy area of the world-famous road in Key West, but tonight was a big night. His luck had finally turned over for the good and he was going to celebrate. He shimmed his way to a table near the stage and plunked the beers down in front of his friend. Captain Mel Barsoom looked at the beers through one squinted eye under impossibly bushy eyebrows.

“Corona?” he gruffed, “you bought me a goddamn Corona?”

“They were out of Yuengling, my friend,” Troy shouted over the band, stretching his hand out to take the beer back. “I’ll drink it if you don’t...”

Mel yanked it out of his fingers. He took a long swig and gave Troy a mean look.

“I guess it’ll do,” he sneered. “Reminds me of the swill I hadda drink back on the Yellow River.”

Troy inhaled deeply. He knew a famous Mel story was coming, and he had no escape.

“That bastard Somali fella had no idea what he was up against when they boarded our boat,” Mel said, launching into the tale.

Troy waved to the girl carrying the tray of green, blue, yellow and red Jello shots around the room. He held up four fingers and mouthed the words, *one of each*, to her. She happily slid four containers off and laid the tray on their table. She straddled Troy’s lap, un-holstered a can of whipped cream from her belt, shoved a shot into his mouth, and filled it up the rest of the way with the white, fluffy spray. This process continued until all four shots were gone. All the while, Mel rambled on in the background.

“Ya know, Troy,” he said and pointed a finger down on the table as if locating a spot on a map, “there’re places near Yan’an and the Hukou Waterfall that the river drops forty-nine feet!”

“Uh huh,” Troy mumbled through a mouth full of whipped cream.

Mel leaned his head back and cackled. “He pointed that AK-47 at me all the while we were floatin’ toward the falls. Had no clue where we were headin’.”

Troy surreptitiously made eye contact with the waitress behind the closest bar and gestured for two more beers.

“But I kept him occupied until the damn falls were roarin’ so loud he couldn’t hear me talkin’,” —Mel’s eyes took on a twinkle of glee— “bastard had to drop his gun to hold on to the rails!” He slapped the table and laughed hysterically.

Troy pretended to laugh right along with him. He turned back to the girl at the bar and changed his order to four more beers. An hour later, Mel was passed out with his head in a puddle of drool on the table. Troy’s head was spinning. He paid the tab with a generous tip, slapped the band guys’ shoulders and told them how great their last set was... even though he couldn’t remember it, then stumbled out to the corner and clambered onto his scooter. Fumbling around in his pocket, he found the key, turned it on, and rotated the throttle.

For about five feet, he was going at least ten miles an hour, until the bike chain snapped taut. He jerked over the handlebars and tumbled to the ground. Standing up, he dusted himself off, checked to see if his hat was still there, and said hello to the nice police officer in front of him.

“Dangit,” he mumbled as he realized he was going to the tank.

“Let’s go, buddy,” the officer said, ushering Troy into the back of his cruiser. “You’re lucky you had that chain on your scooter. I’m warning you, and letting you chill in the drunk tank rather than writing you up for a D.U.I.”

“Shanks, occifer,” Troy garbled as the ground began to wobble under his feet.

To this day, it is up for debate as to whether it was getting into the police car or out of it when Troy threw up on the officer. Either way, it made him feel a great deal better.



THE NEXT MORNING, a plate of cold scrambled eggs and a piece of stale toast was served to Troy in the tank. He chose not to eat it as his stomach still felt a little sour from the night before. He did sip the juice box hungrily and asked for another. The guard said they could only give out one to each person and shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s water in the sink,” he said and pointed to the bathroom.

Troy declined, but another guy sitting in the room with him said he’d trade him his juice for his eggs and toast. He quickly accepted the trade and ignored the ugly looks from the others watching this exchange.

He stood up and walked to the front of the cell and pressed his face against the bars. The cold metal soothed his head. He swore off drinking anything other than a light beer right then and there.

Almost snoozing again, a voice caught his attention and he perked up to eavesdrop.

“... but the bloodwork isn’t back yet?” the first voice asked.

“Not yet,” a second chimed in.

“Geezus crimminy,” the first guy complained, “it’s the twenty-first fuckin’ century and they can’t get a D.N.A. sample tested in a couple days?”

The second laughed sarcastically. “You know they can. It’s just that Key West P.D. isn’t exactly on the top of their list, Steve.”

First guy’s name is Steve. Doesn’t ring a bell.

“Joe, I swear,” Steve said, “I’m outta here so fast when I get something in Miami.”

Second guy’s name is Joe. Still nothing.

“Ha! Miami?” the guy named Joe blurted. “That’s worse than here.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Steve snorted, “but at least the women know how to dress properly up there. They ain’t all granola’d up, ya know?”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Joe said. “Now, read those notes on the Fort Jefferson murder back to me again.”

“You got it,” Steve said, shuffling some paper around. “Okay, here goes.”

Fort Jefferson murder? Troy turned his ear to position it between the bars and listened.

Droning On And On

Ryan Bodean ran his fingers through his floppy blonde hair. He

leaned back in his office chair and yawned. Tropical Storm Daniel had all but killed his Tortuga Adventures business. There was nothing to do now but wait for the people to come back.

When the phone rang, he jumped up, throwing his feet off the desk. A pile of papers flew into the air and made a storm of paperwork confetti all around him.

"Shit," he muttered as he picked up the phone. "Tortuga Adventures, your adventure to Fort Jefferson. This is R.B. speaking. How can I help you?"

He could hardly contain the excitement of a new call coming in and he felt his pulse racing.

"R.B.?" the voice asked.

"That's me," he made his voice smile.

"Where's Troy?"

"Megan?"

"Yes, it's me."

R.B. struggled to hide the disappointment in his voice. "Oh, hey, Megan. He's not here. Haven't seen him all morning. But, there's no one here to fly around, so, it's not a big deal. Why?"

"I've been calling him all day and it keeps going to voicemail," she said

"Yeah, well," R.B. started, "that's not all that unusual."

"Oh, okay." She seemed unsatisfied with that answer. "It's just that I've been checking out these things we brought up from the wreck... we've got to get back out there now that the weather has passed."

R.B. laughed. "Yeah, right. I'm not going back out there and getting shot at again."

"This is really, important," she pleaded. "I need to get a hold of Troy."

"Why don't you just run over to his place?" R.B. asked. "My guess is, he's passed out on the couch. He said he was going out last night."

Something about celebrating.”

“Oh, geez,” she said. “Okay, I’ll head over there now. Thanks, R.B.”

“No worries,” he said, “and when you see him, tell him to give me a call.”

“I will.”

He hung up and leaned back in his chair. After a moment, he sat up and picked up the phone. He dialed Troy. It rang once and then the voicemail picked up. He didn’t leave a message.

Hanging up the phone, he felt a strange sensation that this was not the *usual* absence of Troy after a party night. His phone almost always rang the standard three or four times before the voicemail message came on. He jumped up and grabbed his keys. He’d decided to meet her at the houseboat and make sure everything was okay.



A FEW MINUTES LATER, R.B. was standing out on the deck of Troy’s houseboat with his cellphone up to his ear. His calls to his brother’s phone were still going straight to voicemail.

Megan Simons walked through the sliding glass doors. “Do you think we should call the police?”

“It hasn’t been twenty-four hours yet,” —R.B. disconnected the call — “they won’t even start looking until after that time has passed.”

“You don’t think someone found him and tried to ki—”

“No, I don’t,” R.B. interrupted her. “His scooter isn’t here, his wallet and keys aren’t on the hook by the door, and most importantly, his cowboy hat is gone.”

She looked into his eyes and he thought she must surely see that he wasn’t convinced of this at all. But he moved on from the subject.

He exhaled heavily and put his hands on his hips. “He may just be crashed somewhere, sleeping off a hangover. It’s likely he’ll come stumbling home sometime today... or tomorrow.”

“We can’t wait that long,” Megan started, “because there’s a line of strong storms coming tomorrow. And past that, they keep talking about a new storm brewing that could become another hurricane. We need to get to that site again, and fast.”



VINCE PINZIONI’S heart skipped a beat when Ryan Bodean and Megan walked into Captain Tony’s. There was no sign of Troy, but this was a two-for-one deal that he couldn’t pass up.

And then they asked him to take them out on the boat, and he

couldn't believe his luck. His mind raced, trying to put together a quick plan to permanently erase the two of them and leave no evidence that he'd been anywhere near them.

"Yeah, I can take you out on the boat," he played along, "but what's it for this time? Fishing? Tanning? Drinking?"

R.B. and Megan exchanged a glance. He wondered if they were weighing up whether or not to tell him the truth. But, whatever story they gave, he'd pretend he bought it and would take them out.

"We've found something in the water," R.B. finally said.

"And we just want to see if anything is left of it after the storm," Megan added.

Vince pondered this for a minute. Might be a good chance to check out the site, see if the storm had done a proper job of burying the wreck.

"Oh, yeah?" he said, and laughed his best sarcastic laugh. "You guys in the treasure huntin' biz now?" He slapped a hand on R.B.'s shoulder and shook his head.

"Something like that," R.B. said sheepishly.

"Alright!" Vince clapped his hands together. "So, what's my cut, eh? Do I get a piece of the action?"

He watched as the two of them squirmed like fish out of water.

"I'm playin', I'm playin'," he said, letting them off the hook, "whatever junk you find out there, it's all yours."

He untied his apron and tucked it under the bar. Spotting a box of latex gloves, he shoved a pair into his pocket.

"Let's do dis," he said, smiling broadly as he put his arms around them.

He could not believe his insane luck. Two more loose ends would be tied up by tonight. And whenever Troy showed back up, he'd take care of him too.

"Thanks, Vince," R.B. said.

"Fughedaboutit, bro," Vince said, and grinned.



THE WATER WAS cold and rough. Visibility was near zero. R.B. held his hands out in front of him as he cruised back and forth along the ocean floor. They were right on top of the place they'd discovered the few pieces of shipwreck detritus, but now... there was nothing. His gauge showed that he was nearing the end of his air supply and he decided he'd make one more pass and then come up. He scanned the edge of the coral reef along where he thought they'd seen the cannon. There was absolutely nothing left.

As he peered ahead, a smooth grey snout suddenly bumped into

him. *Shit! Shark!* His heart pounded, and he thrashed backward from the beast and slammed his fist straight down onto its nose.

The impact was so solid, he thought he might've cracked a knuckle bone. *What the hell?* This was no shark. It couldn't have been more than five feet away now, but he could only see a vague blur in the water ahead.

He eased forward until he could see the object more clearly. It was gently swaying from side to side in the current. Thankfully, it was an inanimate object, not a creature from the deep trying to eat him. As he traced along the object, he began to make out the unmistakable outline of a drone. He recognized it from his later days in Afghanistan; this thing was military. *What the hell is this thing doing in the gulf?*

His air gauge pinged. Two minutes left. He swam straight up from the drone, intending to mark its location below where he surfaced. When he broke through, he circled around until he caught sight of the boat. He had drifted maybe fifty-feet away.

"Yo, Vince!" he called after removing his regulator, "over here!"

The captain of the boat turned and saw him, and Vince waved his recognition. The boat rumbled to life and turned slowly in R.B.'s direction. Less than five minutes later, he was climbing into the boat.

"Okay, treasure boy," Vince joked, "you find your gold?"

"No," —R.B. busied himself removing his tanks and diving gear—"but there's a drone down there. Military. Not weaponized, but definitely military."

Vince's face was frozen in a smile. Not a natural looking smile, but a forced one.

"Well... " he said, "that's... strange."

His voice sounded like someone who had just found out their mother-in-law had driven their Ferrari off a cliff. His smile began to fade.

"What the hell is a military drone doin' out here?" Vince's voice now edged into what sounded like anger.

R.B. thought that was an odd emotion to have. "I have no idea," he said, and looked around. "Hey, where's Megan?"

Vince didn't answer. He was staring out at the water. "They frickin' found it," he mumbled, "they sent out a damn drone and found it."

"Huh?" R.B. had no idea what he was going on about. "Vince, where's Megan."

The Italian ship captain seemed to snap out of his daze. He slid a hand under his linen shirt and pulled out a gun.

"Oh, her?" Vince said, pointing the pistol at R.B. "She's tied up down below."

You're Going The Wrong Way

George Wyatt stood on the catwalk below his massive oil rig,

Wyatt 1, as the day began to wane. He couldn't help but feel a little giddy from the news that his crew had found a reservoir of oil nearby and that it looked to be massive. It would be months, maybe years, before they would be able to get through the red tape of regulations and permits to drill there, and maybe another year to get the rig in place. But by all accounts, this looked to be a life-changing sized reservoir.

The gulf didn't look as dark tonight as it had the past few months and he didn't feel like jumping in and letting the black water swallow him. He was waiting for Hector, but this time things would be different. Hector would be leaving without dropping anything off and without picking anything up. This would be the end of their *relationship*.

An hour passed and the usual meeting time drifted by with no sign of Hector. *Odd*, thought Wyatt, *he'd never been late in the past*. Another half hour and he decided to climb back up to the rig. About fifty steps up, he heard the distant buzz of a boat.

"Dammit," he muttered and turned around to descend the massive flight of stairs.

As the sound got closer, he looked out into the water, straining for a look at the boat. He could see it in the distance now and thought that it didn't look like the same boat Hector had used before... again, *odd*.

As it raced closer and closer to the rig, he could tell that this boat had no intention of slowing. *That's not Hector*, he thought and inhaled sharply, then returned to climbing the steps. *At least I'm getting a good workout tonight*.

Nearing the top after a sweat-inducing climb, he looked out in the distance as the sun set below the horizon. The boat was long gone in the coming darkness. But that didn't make any sense; they were heading *out* into the ocean, not *in*. They should've been going the

opposite way at this time of night.

Wyatt closed the hatch and walked toward the control room. Inside, a warm glow told him Gene Henry was still working. *Typical Gene.*

He knocked politely and opened the door to find the man hunched over a computer terminal. The keys were clicking at a thousand-taps-a-second. He never looked up.

“Uh hem!” Wyatt cleared his throat.

No response.

“Gene?”

Nothing.

He walked over and touched the man’s shoulder. Gene jumped like he’d been hit with a taser.

“Oh, shit, George,” he said, breathing heavily, “you scared the shit out of me.”

“I knocked on the damn door,” Wyatt said and laughed, “and I said your name at least twice. You were just too—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Gene interrupted him, “enough about all that.”

Wyatt raised an eyebrow. This was unusual behavior for his hard-working chief drill rigger.

“You’re not gonna believe this,” —Gene’s face had widened into a huge smile— “it went through!”

“Huh?”

“The drill permit,” he said as he pointed at his screen, “it came back approved within an hour after I submitted it.”

George Wyatt almost fainted for the second time this week. “How is that possible?” He leaned over to peer at the computer screen.

“This new president is all about drill-baby-drill, I guess,” Gene said and swiveled his chair around to face Wyatt, “and we’re gonna be rich.”

Wyatt let his mouth hang open.

“Not like millionaire rich,” —Gene stood and put his hands on Wyatt’s shoulders— “like, Bill Gates, *eat your heart out* rich!”

“Ha!” Wyatt exclaimed, “Finally!!”

The two men jumped around in a circle in the booth, nearly knocking over the nearby desk chairs. After a few minutes, they had both settled into a chair and were staring at each other. The door cracked open and Bill Bane stuck his head in.

“You tell him?” he asked Gene.

“Yup,” he said and flashed a *thumbs up*.

“What’s the order, boss?” Bill turned to Wyatt and smiled.

George Wyatt inhaled deeply. After a second, he said, “Bring it up.”

“Yes, sir.” Bill Bane grinned and mocked a salute.

The huge man closed the door behind him, leaving the other two in silence.

“Oh, by the way,” Wyatt said, suddenly remembering why he’d come in here in the first place, “I need you to check the radar. I want to see where a boat I just spotted is going.”

“You bet,” Gene said and turned toward the console, then clicked a few keys.

After a second, the image pinged. One dot was tracing across the screen. Gene used his finger to point farther along their path. “Hmmm,” he said, “strange to be going there at this time of night.”

“Where are they headed, Gene?”

“Fort Jefferson.”



VINCE PINZIONI SLAMMED the iron bars shut. The fort had been shut down after the homicide investigation and they’d only had to cross the yellow police tape in one spot.

He’d thought about shooting his two captives, but decided to wait. He needed Troy too, and he would do them all together. And by the time he had him out here, he’d have a plan to make all of this go away and with zero trace left behind.

R.B. and Megan Simons were bound and wouldn’t be a problem. R.B. stood defiantly, but there wasn’t much defiance in the face of a gun. Vince had also duct taped their wrists together and then wrapped their wrists to the bars of the fort’s prison cells, R.B. in one and Megan in the other.

“You’ll never get away with—”

Vince slammed the butt of his pistol against R.B.’s forehead. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with, kid.

R.B.’s head lolled back and his eyes closed... he was out cold.

The girl screamed, but Vince raised his arm as if to hit her too. That had quieted the bitch, and now she was whimpering with her head down.

“Ain’t nobody anywhere near this place,” he said, grinning, “so scream all you want, honey.”

She was a good looking broad. Maybe he could spend a little time with her before he left them out here. He thought back about how good she had looked in that bikini. She cringed away from him as he took a step, but his cellphone chirped, temporarily saving her from him.

He would get to that in a minute, but not before she gave up the location of the artifacts they had pulled from the shipwreck site.

As he climbed back onto his boat and fired up the engine, he

clicked open his cellphone and tapped out a message.

-All proceeding as planned, Papa.

-*Good. Let me know when it's done.*

-Yes, Papa.

He slid the phone back into his pocket and eased the throttle up to pull his boat off the sand. He never saw the figure crouched down in the trees at the edge of the beach.

Overheard

Troy jerked his head back toward the others milling around the drunk tank.

“Hey, fellas,” he asked them politely, “can you keep it down?”

A few of them grumbled, but most just rolled over and went back to sleep.

One of them walked up to him and tapped his shoulder. “Hey, bro,” he said with a grin that showed a distinct lack of teeth, “you got any Molly?”

Troy could smell something acrid and rotten as the man breathed on him. He tried hard not to breathe through his nose.

“Nope,” he replied, “sorry, dude.”

“Aw, man, you’re just a big ole jabroni, ain’t ya?”

“Jabroni?”

“Yeah, man,” —the guy stuck a finger into Troy’s chest— “a big fat jabroni.”

Troy put his hands up in a surrendering gesture, and lied. “Hey, I had some, but I did it right after they brought me in.”

The man’s tone changed immediately. “Right on, bro. If I had some, I woulda taken it too. You’re all right, dude.”

“Thanks,” Troy said, and nodded.

The man turned away from him and said to the others in the room, “Any of you other jabronis got any Molly?”

Nobody answered, so he proceeded to walk around the room asking everyone individually. No Molly here.

Troy turned his attention back to the conversation happening between Joe and Steve, the officers out in the office just beyond the holding cell.

“So, what we’ve got is a dead park ranger,” the officer named Joe said, “gunshot to the head. No DNA on the blood yet.”

“Check,” the officer named Steve said, and Troy thought he heard the sound of a dry erase marker squeaking across a whiteboard.

“A missing park ranger, one,” —there was a pause and some

papers being shuffled— “Natasha... Wainwright. Current C.I.A. agent.”

Dangit, Troy thought. He knew where Natasha was... the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, which meant that the dead park ranger was James. *Who the hell would want to kill James? Shit, he was one of the good guys.*

“Hector Martinez,” —Joe again— “Cuban drug runner. Shot by Officer Steve Haney in self-defense.”

“Check.”

“Hector’s G.P.S. shows several trips to Fort Jefferson. Suspect in the murder of James Howard, former C.I.A. Blood evidence on the scene in the lab.”

“Check,” Steve said, and added, “You think maybe James was dealin’? Deal gone bad or somethin’?”

James? Troy thought. *C.I.A.? That had to be bad info. Ain’t no way James was C.I.A.*

“No evidence to support that at the fort, but it’s worth exploring,” Joe said.

Steve scribbled something on the whiteboard. Then there was a pause in the conversation and the sound of a cardboard box being opened.

“Bundle of DVDs,” Joe said, “encrypted tighter than a well-digger’s butt. And a couple of kilos of heroin.”

“Check,” Steve said and marked the board again. “Lisa’s workin’ on the DVDs. Should have somethin’ for us soon.”

“Okay, I think that’s it,” Joe said and exhaled heavily.

“I think so.”

“Now, what about the *possibles*?” Joe asked.

“Right.” Steve sounded like he was turning pages on a notepad. “Possibly related, Vince Pinzioni’s boat at the same marina, in the water and recently driven. G.P.S. shows last trip was to Fort Jefferson.”

“I don’t think that goes in *possibly related*,” Joe said. “I think it’s definitely related, given the timeframe and location evidence.”

Troy heard the sound of an eraser on the whiteboard and then more scribbling... moving Vince into the *related* column.

Dangit, Troy thought, *why the hell was Vince out at Fort Jefferson?*

There was a lull in the conversation, then the sound of a chair squeaking as it leaned.

“Hey,” Joe asked suddenly, “where was the trip to, the one right before Fort Jefferson on Vince’s G.P.S.?”

“Um... I dunno,” —Steve resumed shuffling around in the box— “lemme check it out.”

A few clicks later he said, “Eh, just some random location out in

the gulf. Middle of nowhere, just off the reef.”

The wreck site, Troy thought, *Vince went from the wreck site out to Fort Jefferson. Shit...*

“What about Hector’s last few trips?”

More shuffling and clicking sounds. “Um... looks like he went to Cuba and back.”

“No surprise there,” Joe said.

“And had a pit stop at the Wyatt oil rig,” Steve added.

“The Wyatt oil rig?”

“Yup.”

“What the hell for?”

“No clue.”

The officers were silent for a minute. Troy’s head was swimming with all the details. He had no idea how they all fit together, but he was sure there was something bad happening here. And it all seemed to revolve around his shipwreck... the wreck of *The Santa Maria*.

“What else is in the box, Steve?”

“One cellphone found at Fort Jefferson,” he said, “presumed to belong to James.”

“And the message we saw?”

“Just said, *REPORT*.”

“And before that?”

Troy heard Steve click a few times. “Message from James says, *I see them*. Then the other guy says, *take them*. Then James says, *10-4*. Then the other guy says, *let me know when it’s done*. Then there’s a few hours gap, and then, *REPORT*.”

“What’s the number it came from?”

“Blocked.”

“Hmmm... okay.” Joe thought for a second. “What’s the last incoming call?”

“Looks like a local number,” Steve said, “no name matched with it in his contacts.”

“Dial it,” Joe said, “and put it on speaker.”

“Okay.”

Troy heard the muffled sound of the ringing, then someone picked up.

“Who the hell is this?” the voice asked.

Troy immediately recognized the voice.

“Who the hell is *this*?” Steve asked.

“Screw you,” the voice said and the line went dead.

“Shit,” Joe said, “get that traced. We need to know who that is.”

Troy was stunned. Random pieces came together in a way that suddenly made it clear what was happening. Vince had shot James. He was certain of that. And he’d done it after James had shot at them

and sunk their boat. Troy slumped down to the cement floor of the drunk tank.

His friend, James Howard, had shot at them, sunk their boat while trying to kill them, and had sent Natasha to her death at the bottom of the ocean. And he must've known where to look because Vince had told him where the site was after their first trip out. Then Vince had killed James to cover up his involvement.

Troy put his hands on his temples. Vince must be after his shipwreck... he must've thought they'd found treasure. He'd killed James for it and was probably coming for them. *Oh, my God*, Troy thought. *R.B. and Megan! I have to warn them!*

"Hey!" he shouted through the bars as he stood, "I know whose voice that is on the phone!"

He heard the startled sounds of two police officers clipping down the hall toward the cell.

"I have to get out of here," Troy yelled, "there are more people in danger."

The two officers rounded the corner. "Open it," the man named Joe called to the officer at the desk.

An electric buzz sounded and the door clicked. He opened it and motioned to Troy.

"Okay, let's go," he waved him out of the cell. "What have you got?"

As they walked back to the office where the two men had been going over the case, Troy urgently mapped it out for them. He told the whole story of the wreck, finding Megan Simons to help them, their excursion on Vince's boat followed by the trip on the *Wyatt Knott*, his friendship with James who had apparently shot at them sinking the *Wyatt Knott* and Natasha's boat killing her... he spelled it all out for them.

"Whoa," Steve said. "Now, that's a tangled web."

"All comes back to Vince Pinzioni," Joe said, "doesn't it?"

"Where do you suppose he is now?" Steve asked.

"He's after my brother and Megan," Troy said, "and then probably me. He wants everyone out of the way so he can take the shipwreck for himself."

A new voice surprised them all from the office doorway. "That's not exactly what he wants."

"Who the hell are you?" Steve asked.

"Steve, please," —Joe held his hand to quiet his partner and stood — "So? Who the hell are you?"

The man smiled. He was impeccably dressed. Troy didn't know what a thousand-dollar suit really looked like, but he thought this man was surely wearing one. His hair was close cropped, but wavy,

and brushed back from slightly greying temples. His eyes were blue; not plain, like Troy's, but crystalline looking. They almost glowed.

"My name is Chris Collins," he said coolly, holding out a hand toward Joe, "I'm the Deputy Director of the C.I.A."

Dangit, thought Troy, *there goes my treasure*.

Santa Maria

“**L**ast year,” Chris Collins began, “I got a credible lead on a find in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico that could perhaps have belonged to the Santa Maria. Yes, *the* Santa Maria, of Christopher Columbus fame. It was a piece of the stern that gave us a very rough idea, with carbon dating and material analysis, that it might be *that* famous ship. Without going into too much detail, we had a great many people working on this find.”

Troy inhaled sharply. *How the hell does the Deputy Director of the C.I.A. know anything about this? And, dangit, why does he care?*

“You may be wondering why I care about the Santa Maria,” he continued.

Whoa, Troy thought, is this dude in my head?

Joe’s phone rang, interrupting the monologue. It was Steve Haney.

“Go ahead, Steve,” Joe said into the phone. He nodded as he listened. He did not smile. Clicking the phone to disconnect, he turned to Troy.

“They’ve scoured the island,” he said grimly, “and there’s no sign of your brother or Ms. Simons.”

“Dangit.” Troy stood. “I gotta get out there and find them.”

“Mr. Bodean,” —Chris spoke to him directly for the first time— “you may want to hear what I’m about to say so you’ll know what you’re going up against.”

Troy eased back into his chair. “I know what I’m going up against. Vince Pinzioni has probably kidnapped and maybe murdered my brother and my friend.”

“Please,” Chris said, holding up a hand, “five minutes. Then I’ll get on the phone and get the whole of the C.I.A. down here on this case to find them. It’s very likely he hasn’t killed them yet.”

“How can you know that?” Joe piped in.

“Because he’s after me.”

“What?” Troy and Joe said in unison.

“You see, our family name has not always been Collins,” he said.

"It has gone through several changes. Before Collins it was Collier. Before that it was Columa. And before that, it was Columbo or in English, Columbus."

"So, your name should really be Chris Columbus?" Troy asked.

"Precisely."

"As in, the Christopher Columbus who sailed the ocean blue in 1492?"

"Well, that's the fictionalized version," Chris nodded, "but essentially... yes."

"Dangit," Troy said and slapped the arm of his chair.

"What is it?" Chris *Columbus* asked him.

"You're gonna take all the stuff we found," he said, exhaling, "ain't ya?"

He smiled and nodded yes. "But there is a considerable reward. Not the millions you were thinking, but it should ease the pain."

"Forgive me for intruding," Joe Bond said as he tapped a pen on his desk, "but how does Vince Pinzioni fit into all of this?"

"Well, much like my family name is not Collins," —Chris looked out the window— "his is not Pinzioni."

"I don't follow."

"Not many people would," he said and turned back toward them. "Most of us know the story of Columbus, as flawed as our version might be, but we know almost nothing of the captains of the Niña and the Pinta. They were Martín Alonso and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón."

"Okay, let me get this straight," —Joe Bond was scribbling notes on a yellow pad— "the Columbuses and the Pinzóns have come down through history searching for this boat?"

Chris nodded.

"And Troy here found it in the gulf," Joe said.

"Well, technically," Chris said, "we found it last year and sent a drone to examine the site and take a satellite image for us."

Joe scratched out the last line about Troy. Troy grimaced.

"Right," Joe continued. "So, you found the boat with the drone."

"Not exactly," Chris said, "the drone was shot down. We suspect someone working with Vince brought it down. The last images sent by the drone show what appears to be a Latin man aiming a 1960s era bazooka at it. We sent Natasha Wainwright down to recover anything left of the drone last year."

He looked over at Troy. "She had no idea why it was here, only that it was top secret and should be recovered discretely."

"She didn't know about the shipwreck until she found us," Troy said and looked down at his hands. He wrung them together. After a few moments of silence, he inhaled deeply. "So, I got her killed, is basically what you're saying?"

“Mr. Bodean,” Chris said and put a hand on his shoulder, “Vince Pinzioni is a brutal man. He would’ve killed her just for getting too close to the site.”

“But I’m still lost on this whole Pinzón – Columbus feud,” Joe Bond interjected. “What’s so important about the remnants of the Santa Maria? Is it really worth killing over?”

“The part of the story that you may not know is that the Pinzóns mutinied,” Chris explained as he turned toward the detective. “They sunk the Santa Maria off the coast of Haiti, claiming it was unfit for the voyage. Because of this lost ship, they had to leave some of their crew behind.”

“Whadda ya know,” —Joe leaned back in his chair— “I had no idea.”

“Not many do,” Chris continued. “This is where we believe the true story breaks from recorded history. We believe they murdered Christopher Columbus and left his body behind. They replaced him with an imposter and returned to Spain to receive the glory.”

“Who did they replace him with?” Joe asked. “I mean, wouldn’t they realize this was a different man?”

“The voyage at sea and in the so-called new world took several years,” Chris said, shrugging. “With his clothes and mannerisms, it’s definitely possible. Take a look at the painting called *The return of Christopher Columbus*; his audience before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella by Eugène Delacroix. It doesn’t look like the joyous return of Christopher Columbus. In fact, several people in the painting look confused and are whispering. Even Ferdinand and Isabella don’t look like they are welcoming the explorer back home. Check it out sometime and you’ll see what I mean.”

“Incredible,” Joe breathed.

“So, who took his place?” Troy asked.

“We believe it was Vicente,” —Chris took on a serious tone— “and they paid another sailor to stand in for him when they left so many at Hispaniola. And that’s when the Columbus name began to fall into disrepute.”

“And the wreck could provide evidence as to what really happened?” Joe asked.

“Perhaps,” Chris said, and nodded. “A remote possibility, but we will take that chance.”

“And the Pinzóns don’t want that,” Troy added.

“Exactly.”

Lisa Carlson knocked lightly on the door. Joe Bond walked over and opened it. The crime lab intern had a stack of DVDs in her hand.

“I can’t crack this,” she said as she gave the disks to Joe, “s’gotta be government encryption. Better than anything I can throw at it.”

“Thanks for trying, Lisa.” Joe took them and ushered her out.

Chris Collins held out his hand. “I believe those belong to us.”

Joe handed them to the Deputy Director of C.I.A.

“What I’m about to say is classified, and if you ever revealed it,” — Chris looked at both Joe and Troy in turn— “it would be grounds for the C.I.A. to detain you indefinitely. Am I clear?”

Joe nodded his assent.

“Oh yeah,” Troy said when Joe elbowed him, “you bet.”

“Good. Natasha had started a program on her own, designated codename: Stingray,” Chris said, tapping the case of the DVD on top, “with the help of a Cuban refugee to collect intel and deliver it to us. In return, we granted the man amnesty in the United States. Hector Martinez was his name, I believe? He would collect the intel on discs we sent him and drop them at the *Wyatt 1* oil rig for her to pick up. The entire operation happened in international waters... except for the drop. She couldn’t touch the DVDs until they were passed on to a third party within the coastal United States Waters or it would be considered espionage.”

“So, that’s why Hector’s G.P.S. showed trips to the *Wyatt 1*.” Joe looked toward his whiteboard with all the arrows and lines connecting details from the case.

“You have his G.P.S.?” Chris asked.

Joe nodded.

“Of course, this is a federal case now so—”

“I know, I know,” —Joe held up his hand and waved toward the box of evidence— “it’s all yours.”

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

“So, now can we go find my brother and Megan?” Troy stood up and stretched.

“Let me make a call, Mr. Bodean,” said Chris Collins. “May I use your office for a moment, Joe?”

“Of course.” He stood and touched Troy’s elbow. “Let’s go get my cruiser ready.”

They left Chris talking into his cellphone in low hushed tones.

“Can you believe all that?” Troy asked Joe.

“Pretty incredible,” Joe said.

As they hurried toward the door, the woman at the front desk called to them. “Detective Bond,” she said, waving a piece of paper at him, “I have a message for you from one...” She looked down at the note, “... George Wyatt.”

They both stopped dead in their tracks.

“It came in last night, but you weren’t in yet.”

“What’s it say, Wanda?”

“Something about him seeing a strange boat out on the water last

night after midnight,” she read, “heading out for Fort Jefferson.”

“Dangit,” Troy said, “that’s where he took ‘em when I was out last night.”

“Let’s go.” Joe turned and ran for the door.

“Hey, wait, Mr. Bodean!” called Wanda, “dontchu want your things?”

He looked back at her. She was holding a plastic admissions bag with his wallet, keys and watch in her left hand, and in her right she held his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat.

He grabbed it and threw it on his head. “Much obliged, ma’am,” he said, and ran out the police station door.

Smoke Signals

Megan Simons shivered with fear and cold. She was damp

from the boat ride with Vince and the musty air inside the fort. There were no windows, and now that the sun had set there was no light. R.B. was still unconscious in the darkness of the next cell. Her mind screamed with fear, but she knew if she gave into the terror she would be like all those bimbos in the horror movies. No, she would maintain her composure and think. There had to be a way to get out of here.

Her first problem was the tape binding her hands to the cell's bars. She pulled furiously against it, but she well knew the incredible strength of the magical silver tape. Her wrists burned as she felt it cut into her skin. *Okay, what now?* Inventory.

She was sitting in an empty stone prison cell wearing a t-shirt and shorts. She didn't have anything in her pockets; Vince had emptied them. Nothing. She had nothing. The fear began to creep back into her mind. Vince was going to come back and kill them and there was nothing she could do about it.

She kicked the bar and her sandal flew off and skittered across the floor. Pain flared into her toe and she wondered if she had broken it.

"Ow, shit, shit, shit," she said, exhaling sharply.

She couldn't even reach her hands down to rub the pain away. She gently rubbed her toes against her leg, though, and the pain eventually subsided. The toe didn't feel broken after all, but now she had one shoe off and one shoe on. She eased her heel down against the back of the other sandal to slide it off. *Might as well take it off too.*

The cell was nearly pitch black, with only the glow of a distant emergency light trickling into the darkness, but she saw the glint. The clasp on her sandal caught just enough light to throw the faintest shimmer. Maybe...

She raised her foot toward her head (thank goodness for all that hot yoga) and pulled the sandal off with her mouth. She was able to tilt her head back enough so she could grasp the shoe in her hands. She unfastened the strap and felt the edge of the clasp, not very sharp,

but it might do the trick. Though duct tape has extreme strength when pulled against, if you tear it from the side, it can rip easily.

She couldn't see the tape well, but she guessed there were about five loops of the stuff around her wrists. Holding the shoe in her right hand and twisting her wrists allowed her to barely touch the edge of the tape between her hands. She started sawing back and forth. At first, it seemed hopeless; the clasp merely bent. But finally the edge found purchase and made a small tear in the side of one layer of the tape.

A sheen of sweat began to form as she sawed furiously back and forth with the tiny piece of metal. Her fingers became slick with sweat and just as she thought she was making good progress, the sandal jumped out of her hand and toppled end over end through the bars and landed four feet away.

"Ahhh, noooo," she wailed.

In a fit of fear and anger, she wrenched her hands back and forth as hard as she could, but the tape didn't budge. Tears began streaming down her face and she slumped down, realizing there was no escape. The ancient prison wing of Fort Jefferson and the wonders of modern duct tape had them trapped.



NATASHA WAINWRIGHT BRUSHED the sand from her knees as she rose from her crouching position under the small copse of trees just above the sandy beach of Fort Jefferson. The man in the boat, whoever he was, had dragged two people into the fort and had just left without them. She had recognized R.B. and the girl who'd been on Troy's boat when they had been shot at, sinking her own boat in the process.

In the craziness of the two boats going down, she'd gotten tangled in one of the bow lines of Troy's boat and it had dragged her down with its sinking bulk. The rope was caught hard around her ankle, and with the weight of the boat holding it steady, she couldn't free herself. Rather than try to fight against the weight, she guessed her best bet was to hold her breath, save her energy, and wait until it hit the bottom, thus giving the rope some slack.

It took forever. The cabin of the boat was still holding some air, slowing its descent, but it was a long way down. Even with her expanded lungs from all the triathlon training, she knew she wouldn't have enough air left to make it back to the surface. Troy's boat, marked *Wyatt Knott* on the stern, settled slowly, crunching into the reef at the bottom of the gulf. The line around her ankle went slack and an idea suddenly occurred to her. The cabin of the boat had plenty of air trapped inside. She swam down under the capsized boat

and made her way into the cabin in virtually one hundred percent blackness. No visibility.

She burst up and into a pocket of air, gasped, and took several deep breaths. Debris from the wreck bobbed around her, bumping into her from all sides. She used her arms to sweep a protective shield around her and thankfully bumped up against what felt like a flashlight. She felt around the barrel and clicked a button on the side. Dim light filled the cabin and shocked her vision. The light flickered and threatened to go out, so she clicked it off to conserve the probably nearly-dead battery.

As she treaded water, she began to think about what had just happened. They had been fired upon directly over the site of Troy's find and over the site of her drone crash. The perpetrator could be anyone; foreign national after the drone, shipwreck hunters after Troy's gold, drug runners thinking her coast guard boat was after them. She was literally and figuratively in the dark. And that's when something bumped against the window of the cabin.

She froze. Slowly pointing the light in the direction of the bump, she clicked it on. A massive gray shape was easing by the windows of the cabin. She immediately clicked the light off, praying the shark hadn't seen the light. It bumped a few more times, probably just investigating the wreckage. It never threatened her, but just seemed to be hanging out. *Perfect*, she thought.

The shark bumped again and the boat lurched and settled into the sand. Air bubbles rushed out of some newly exposed opening, shrinking Natasha's current air pocket to the size of a basketball. Her heart raced and she clicked on the light. The black eyes of the shark were staring directly at her through a window right next to her face. She shrieked, shutting the light off and slamming her hand over her mouth. The shark went into a frenzy of slamming into the window. Each time it hit the boat, more bubbles escaped from the cabin, but the air pocket held. For what seemed like an eternity—maybe six or seven hours—it went on this way until Natasha heard the low rumble of an approaching boat.

Shit, she thought, *can't get to the surface in time to catch a ride*. The boat seemed to hover nearby for a few minutes, then the roar started again and she heard it move away. *Well, that was it, my rescuers have disappeared into the distance and I'm going to be eaten by a shark*. She waited for the shark to bump again, figuring one good shove would push the remaining air out of the cabin and she'd be forced to evacuate, but it never came. She strained to keep as still and quiet as possible. Nothing.

Here goes nothing, she thought and inhaled deeply and clicked on the light, ready to extinguish it if she saw the shark. No sign of it. She

peered from window to window looking for the grey hulk. It was gone, or at least beyond her line of sight. It made sense; the boat probably spooked it.

She took a good look around, planning her escape. The hatch was hanging open, floating lazily back and forth under her. She could stick her head out, see if the coast was clear, and then make for the surface. Once she was out, she'd be a sitting duck, nothing more than shark bait. In her mind, the theme from Jaws began to rumble as she drifted over to float above the hatch. She took a deep breath and went under.

A few minutes later, she broke through the surface with no interference from the shark... yet. Pieces of drifting wood still littered the surface. The sky to the north was black and foreboding. The storm had passed over. *Good grief*, she thought, *how long was I under there? More than six or seven hours for sure. Funny how time flies when you're having fun.*

A large section of wood, maybe a section of flooring with green AstroTurf glued to it, drifted nearby and she swam over to it. It was big enough to roll herself up on and despite the warning alarms clanging inside her head, she fell asleep.

Waking sometime the next day, she assessed her situation and determined the best direction to swim. With nothing but blue water all around, she made a judgment based on the sun and the current and started off. After hours of kicking, paddling and resting, kicking, paddling and resting, finally—amazingly—Fort Jefferson came into sight.

It was off to her left in the distance... if she hadn't been close enough to catch sight of it, she would've been paddling out into the Atlantic Ocean and would've surely been lost at sea. She raced against darkness to get to the sandy shore of the fort before night obscured it again. She had crawled ashore at dusk, and with no energy left to get inside, she passed out again on the beach. She awoke to the sound of a boat coming ashore nearby and watched as a man dragged R.B. and the girl from Troy's boat into the fort. Not long after, she watched him get back into his boat alone.

She padded into the Fort and down the long stone hallways to her office. She drank three bottled waters and stripped out of her damp, crusty clothes. Replacing them with a new uniform and feeling wind-burned and achy, she set out into the fort to find the two people the man had apparently dropped off here. As she passed by James Howard's office she jumped. Crime scene tape crisscrossed his door. No one was inside. She realized with a start that she'd watched the whole scene of this kidnapping unfold with no sign of James.

She passed the room by... that mystery would have to be solved later. There were two people stashed somewhere in the fort and she

needed to find them—or their bodies—quickly. *If I were hiding people here*, she thought to herself, *where would I put them?*

After a second, she jogged down the corridor leading to the prison wing.



VINCE PINZIONI KNOCKED on the door at the Dolphin Research Center on Grassy Key. The door was a non-tourist type with an industrial lock and keypad. He knocked again and saw a young girl look through the glass.

“We’re closed.” Her voice was muffled and she shrugged as if to indicate she was sorry.

“Yeah, yeah,” Vince said and smiled his biggest smile. “I know, I’m a friend, though. Megan and R.B. sent me.”

A look of confusion came over her face and she clicked the button to buzz the door open. Vince shoved his way in quickly, grabbed her around the neck and one hand covering her mouth.

“Anybody else in here?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head.

“Okay, then,” he said, “we’re gonna do this nice ‘n slow. I’m gonna take my hand off your mouth and you’re gonna take me to my stuff.”

Her eyes narrowed, clearly not understanding what he meant. He eased his hand away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Listen, um—”

“Chelsea.”

“Listen, Chelsea,” —he tightened his grip on her neck— “your friends, R.B. and Megan, brought some things up here the other day. Things that don’t belong to them. I want them back.”

Chelsea’s eyes flicked toward the lab. “In there.”

“That’s real good.” Vince eased his grip. “Let’s go in there and see what we got.”



RYAN BODEAN OPENED HIS EYES, but pain shot into his temple and he closed them quickly. The pain did not go away. He heard himself groan.

“Oh, thank God!” came a voice nearby. “Are you okay?”

His head was so fuzzy he couldn’t tell if it was a woman’s voice or a man’s. He didn’t know if he knew the speaker or not. Everything felt like it was being strained through a bunch of cotton balls.

“I... I don’t... ” he started.

Words were hard. The voice was chattering at him a mile a minute, but he still couldn't understand her. *Her*? It dawned on him that he could tell it was a woman.

"R.B.," she said at the end of a long and rambling rant, "how are we going to get out of here?"

His head slowly began to clear. He opened his eyes and all was dark. "Where are we getting out of exactly?" he asked the voice.

"Fort Jefferson," Megan spoke rapidly. "Vince kidnapped us and brought us here. He didn't kill us, though. I'm not sure why. Just tied us up and..."

Her voice faded into the background. Megan. Her name was Megan. Bits and pieces of their situation began to come back to him.

"Okay, okay," he pleaded, "just give me a second. Head still spinning."

"Oh, God," she said, "are you okay?"

"I think so," he said, "just need a minute."

He heard her sniff, probably crying. He decided to pretend confidence to keep her from falling apart.

"Listen," he said calmly, "give me a sec to clear my head and we'll figure this thing out."

"Mmhmm," she said, sniffing again.

"Don't worry, Megan," —his head throbbed, but he was beginning to feel human again— "I'll get us out of here."

Then footsteps, running, reverberated down the stone hallway.

"Omigod, omigod," Megan cried frantically, "he's coming back!"

The footfalls stopped.

"Shhhhh," R.B. said and strained to listen.

"Helloooo?" a voice echoed in the darkness.

R.B. saw a flashlight beam sweep back and forth.

"R.B.?" the voice called. "Are you down here?"

He knew his head was not right yet, but he could swear it was Natasha's voice. But she'd drowned in the boat explosion.

"Helloooo?" Her voice was more insistent.

It was definitely her.

"Natasha?" he croaked.

"Yes, it's me."

The beam of light got stronger and suddenly washed into their cells. The light was blinding and he closed his eyes.

"Thank, God. Oh, thank God," he heard Megan crying out.

"Hold on a second." Natasha covered the light with her hand to ease the brightness. "Let me cut you loose."

She pulled a knife from her belt and made quick work of the duct tape. R.B. eased himself to his feet. Megan jumped up and hugged Natasha with both arms around her neck.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Natasha, it’s good to see you made it,” R.B. said as he rubbed his raw wrists, “but how in the world...”

“Long story. I’ll tell you over a beer sometime.”

Suddenly, Megan was running down the corridor.

“Megan!” R.B. yelled after her, “where’re you going?”

“Chelsea,” her voice rang out, “he’s going after Chelsea.”

She disappeared down the hallway.

“R.B.,” Natasha said and turned, “do you want to break the bad news to her, or should I?”

“Huh?” he asked, “what bad news?”

“I swam to the island,” she said, walking, “we don’t have a boat.”

“Oh,” he said, “that bad news.”

They walked at a fast clip back toward her office.

“Phone?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Power’s still off from the storm. And I have no idea where my cell is... probably at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Okay, fantastic,” R.B. said and clapped his hands together, “looks like we’re gonna need an old-fashioned bonfire.”

“Smoke signals?” she asked.

“Yup.”

Motion Sickness

Gidget, the seaplane of the Tortuga Adventures ferry service

from Key West to Fort Jefferson, rushed into the air. Troy Bodean was piloting and Joe Bond was sitting in the first passenger seat looking incredibly green. The detective had admitted to Troy that he hated flying and within minutes of taking off, he'd stuck his head in a bag and lost his lunch.

"You gonna be alright, Joe?"

Joe's muffled reply, followed by the retching sounds of dry heaving, answered that question pretty quickly. Troy decided to leave the fact that they were burning fuel too quickly left unsaid. He knew they would make it out to the fort, but wasn't sure about the trip back. Gidget is a thirsty girl.

After the sick detective had filled the last barf bag, his stomach finally settled enough that he could carry on a conversation.

"Troy," he started, "I just want you to consider the possibility that we will find something... bad... when we get there."

Troy had already considered that. It could be that Pinzioni had killed them. But it didn't seem to fit. Why bother to haul them out to Fort Jefferson if you were just going to kill them. And since reconnecting with his brother, that weird sibling bond had come back. He knew R.B. was okay, even if he couldn't explain how he knew. But he was still concerned.

"Nah," he said, "I think they're gonna be just fine."

He wasn't sure how much he really believed that, but he said it just the same.

"Well, it looks like the C.I.A. is going to claim jurisdiction over your find."

"Yeah," —Troy sucked air over his teeth— "looks that way, don't it?"

"That's gotta hurt."

"Won't be the first time I've lost it all."

"Oh yeah?"

“Yeah,” Troy said. “After the war, I thought I lost my brother and then there was that craziness back in South Carolina.”

“You lived in South Carolina?”

“Yup, out on Pawleys Island,” he said and nodded, adjusting his Outback Tea Stained Straw cowboy hat, “but that’s a long story.”

“Arrogantly shabby, eh?” Joe smiled.

“That’s what they say,” Troy said.

He wondered idly what Karah was up to these days. He’d gone out of his way not to make contact and dredge up things that were better left... un-dredged. Every now and then, he drank a Corona and thought about what might have been.

“There she is,” Joe said and pointed a finger out a nearby window.

The sight of Fort Jefferson from the air is truly breathtaking. The walls of the fort are two-tiered casemates in a hexagon shape, with two of the walls measuring three-hundred twenty-five feet, and the other four measuring four hundred seventy-seven feet. Large corner bastions, designed to allow defensive fire along the faces of the walls they joined, contained gunrooms, gunpowder magazines and a granite spiral staircase. Each tier of the casemates contained one hundred and fifty guns, and another one hundred and fifty were placed on top of the fort itself. The heavy guns were mounted inside the walls in a string of open casemates, or gunrooms, facing outward toward the sea through large openings called embrasures.

Inside the walls is a thirteen-acre parade ground that contained additional powder magazines, headquarters, a hospital, officer quarters and three large barracks. A modern light tower replaced the old Garden Key lighthouse—the first structure built on the island.

“Incredible,” Joe said.

“Mhmm,” Troy said, nodding, “takes my breath away every time I see it.”

“Looks like someone’s having a fire.”

Troy banked the plane and looked out the side window. A plume of smoke was drifting up from the center of the parade grounds. He smiled to himself. “Looks like R.B. set a signal fire,” he said. “I knew he’d be—”

Troy was interrupted by a loud sputtering sound coming from the engine. The fuel gauge sat on empty... dead empty. And just like in the movies, he tapped it with a finger, hoping that it would magically snap up to a full tank.

“Dangit!”

“What?” Joe asked, a touch of hysteria slipping into his voice. “What’s that sound? What’s going on? Are we going down?”

“Don’t worry, Joe,” —Troy looked back up toward the fort—
“We’re gonna land just fine.”

“Okay, good,” Joe said, sweat beads forming on his forehead. “That’s good, right?”

“Yup, I ain’t worried about the landing at all.” Troy sniffed. “It’s the takin’ off again that might be a problem.”

That’s when Detective Joe Bond barfed again... without a bag... all over himself.



R.B. SPOTTED the plane a few miles out and began to jump around and yell. “Hot damn,” he yelled, “he did it! My bro figured it out! We’re getting’ outta here!”

After the harsh swim Natasha had been through and Megan’s kidnapping experience, they couldn’t help but join in. Like a group of natives in a tribal ritual, they circled the fire, dancing and whooping.

And that’s when R.B. heard the sputtering sound he knew all too well. He stopped dancing and looked up toward the plane. Shielding his eyes, he peered at it closely. The propeller had stopped moving. His elation became immediate sorrow, then his sorrow became anger.

“Tell me he didn’t,” he groaned.

Natasha and Megan slowly realized that R.B. wasn’t happy anymore and they stopped their celebratory dancing as well.

“What do you mean?” Megan asked. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s out of fuel.”

“Wait, what?” Natasha asked, “he’s out of fuel... as in... no gas?”

“Yeah,” R.B. inhaled. “He’s out of gas.”

“So, what does that mean?” Megan asked.

“It means that we’re all stranded out here now.”

“Yeah, but he can radio or call the shore, right?” Natasha asked.

R.B. thought about it. “Yes, he can, but that still means another two to three hours, probably more like four or five, before we get out of here.”

“But that’s not quick enough!” Megan cried. “He’s going after Chelsea.”

“Going after Chelsea?” R.B. turned to her. “Why?”

“Because she has the artifacts from the wreck,” she said, “and he wants them bad. I have no idea why, but he was going to kill me. I had to tell him where they were.”

“Okay, okay,” R.B. said, holding his hands out, “we’ll just call the police inland and have them head up there. She’ll be fine.”

Megan had tears in her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“It’ll be fine,” R.B. said, completely sure that it wouldn’t be fine, “I promise.”

They watched as Troy brought the plane down, gliding it in

expertly. The landing looked perfect, even if it was on an empty tank. The fire had mostly burned out, so they decided it was safe to leave it. They had intentionally built it in the center of the parade ground with nothing nearby.

Jogging down to the beach ahead of the girls, R.B. watched as Troy sloshed through the surf, pulling the seaplane behind him with a tow line. He struggled some, but the surf helped him push the plane toward the island. When he got close enough, R.B. waded out to help. A few minutes later, when the plane was safely secured, R.B. punched Troy hard on the shoulder.

"Are you kidding me?" he demanded. "You didn't check the fuel?"

Troy rubbed his shoulder. "Bro, I was in a hurry! I thought you were dead."

R.B. grabbed him and hugged him tight. He noticed a figure sitting in the plane. The man looked ill.

"Who's that?" he said, pointing at him.

"A detective. He knows who's been trying to kill us and get my treasure," Troy said.

"Good." R.B. started wading out toward the plane. "We need him to call the shore. Chelsea's in danger."

"Chelsea?" Troy asked, following him out.

"She works with Megan," R.B. said, "and she's got the artifacts at the dolphin center on Islamorada and Vince is on his way there now."

"Dangit," Troy grunted. "Dang Pinzons and Columbuses... why can't everyone just leave my shipwreck alone."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," R.B. said, "but let's get in there and radio the Coast Guard."

Troy nodded.

"They'll call the police and get them on their way," R.B. said as they reached the plane, "and then we can get them to send someone out here with fuel... or a boat to take us back."

"I got that covered," Troy said as they climbed aboard Gidget, "so after you call the police, I'll call George."

"Who?" R.B. slumped into the pilot's seat and clicked on the radio. "George Wyatt? Why?"

"Long story," Troy said as Joe stood up and leaned into the cockpit. "Joe, meet my brother, R.B."

The detective reached out a hand and threw up on R.B.

History

Chris Collins got the call and drove as fast as the two-lane road up from Key West would allow. Grassy Key is 59 miles up the chain of islands known as the Florida Keys and the average speed limit is below thirty miles-per-hour. Chris's black Mercedes was traveling at about ninety-five. Fortunately there was just his and three other cars going north. None going south. He passed them easily without slowing down. On the way, he dialed into the secure line at the C.I.A. and re-routed all incoming personnel to Grassy Key, but he knew it would take too long for them to back him up. He was on his own for this operation.

He pulled in to the Dolphin Research Center about a half hour later. It looked to be deserted. He approached the rear door cautiously and noticed it was slightly ajar. A keypad lock was buzzing, apparently to notify the occupant that the door wasn't closed properly. Pulling his Glock from his shoulder holster, he eased the door open so he could slip inside.

His shoes clacked loudly as he walked the halls. If Pinzioni was here, he would certainly know he was coming. He tipped open door after door and found no sign of Vince. He found the saltwater tanks that R.B. had told him the artifacts had been soaking in... empty. And maybe more disturbing was that there was no sign of the girl, Chelsea, either.

Dammit, I'm too late. Pinzioni had probably high-tailed it out of here with the girl and the artifacts a long time ago. He clicked open his phone to see how long a satellite image would take when something began to tickle at the back of his mind. Vince wouldn't go north. His history, his ancestors, his legacy... it was all south of here in the Gulf of Mexico. But Chris hadn't passed anyone going south... not one single car.

"He's on a boat," Chris suddenly said to himself.

This whole story was about a boat, the Santa Maria, and the unfortunate events that were still up for debate today. Vince Pinzioni

would've come up here by boat and that's how he would return. Chris squealed his car out of the parking lot, taking a left and then immediately another left into the Grassy Key Marina.

He caught sight of a man shoving a girl in front of him out onto the dock. He was also dragging a large, army-style duffel bag that looked to be heavy. Beside the dock was his boat, *The Ocean Blue*.

Of course, thought Chris as he jumped from his car and ran toward them. In fourteen-hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the *ocean blue*. Vince either wasn't paying attention, or didn't expect anyone to be there, but he never saw Chris coming up behind them.

He dumped the bag into his boat and started to shove the girl in after it.

"Pinzon!" Chris yelled, leveling his gun at him.

Vince froze. He turned slowly and looked back at the Deputy Director of the C.I.A. Chris saw the pistol tucked in Vince's waistband.

"Well, well, well," he said, smiling, "if it ain't the golden boy, Chris Columbus."

"It's Collins now."

"Same difference."

"Let the girl go, Pinzon."

"It's Pinzioni now," Vince said through a sneer.

"Same difference."

"Touché."

"Let her go," —Chris holstered his own gun and held up his hands — "and I let you get in that boat and sail off into the sunset."

Vince Pinzioni tilted his head back and laughed. "Yeah, right. Like you ain't got the whole agency bearin' down on us right now."

Chris nodded. "It's true."

He glanced at his watch and shook it toward Vince. "But they're probably still a good two hours away. Plenty of time for you to disappear."

"Ha! Disappear from the C.I.A.?" Vince said sarcastically. "I know the end of that scenario. I'll be disappeared all right. Up to Siberia, or wherever it is you guys are keeping people now."

"Guantanamo," Chris said, "they'd take you to Guantanamo. But I can call them off if you let her go right now. Start a new life, find a new place. We won't bother you anymore."

Vince's face faltered for just a second. "That ain't happenin', Chris. You know that."

"Then I guess I'll have to take you out, Vince," —Chris drew his gun— "I don't have any choice."

"It ain't true, ya know?" Vince said suddenly.

"Excuse me?"

"The stories." Vince jerked his head toward the water. "The

Pinzons didn't do what you think they did. It's all gotten changed and rearranged and the real history is anybody's guess."

"I think those things you have in that bag might tell a different story." Chris pointed his left hand toward the boat and eased the gun up to point at him.

"This junk?" Vince laughed. "Ain't nothin' but a bell and some pots. Nothin' more."

"Then you can keep them," —Chris had a solid grip on his gun—"just let me have the girl."

"Nah, sorry. No can do," Vince said as he shook his head.

Chelsea, who had been watching this exchange in silence, apparently wondering at the alternate history being debated in front of her, suddenly snapped into motion. Her hands were duct-taped together, but Vince was holding her by the elbow. Her interlaced, bound hands became a sledge-hammer. In a flash, she swung up hard, slamming them into Vince's chin. He was lifted off the ground as his head snapped backward. He lost his balance and tumbled into the water beside his boat.

Chelsea ran toward Chris. He grabbed her and ducked behind another boat moored nearby. Vincent was struggling to climb onto the dock.

"Vince," Chris called out, "if you start that boat, I'm going to have to shoot you."

"You ain't gonna do shit," he heard Vince yell, "or I'm gonna slice that kid R.B. and his girl to pieces and mail them to you."

Dammit. He'd forgotten about them. He knew that Joe and Troy were searching for them, but as long as they were still missing, he couldn't shoot Vince.

"Okay, okay." Chris's mind raced trying to come up with a solution. "You have your artifacts, I have the girl. I'll call off the C.I.A. dogs if you'll let those people go. Otherwise, I'll have them hunt you down."

"Eat shit, Collins," he said as his boat rumbled to life.

It turned away from the dock and jumped up on its wake, speeding away from the marina. Chris raised his gun and aimed at the back of the boat.

"No!" Chelsea yelled. "If you shoot him, we'll never find Megan or R.B.!"

"Dammit!" Chris holstered his gun and watched as the boat disappeared into the distance.

He opened his cellphone to a missed text message from Detective Joe Bond via the Coast Guard.

-We have them. All safe.

He closed the message and dialed a number.

“This is Deputy Director Collins,” he said into the phone, “I want all satellites pointed at the Florida Keys. I want all boats tracked anywhere within ninety miles of this place.” He hung up.

“Okay, Chelsea,” he said tucking the phone into his pocket, “let’s go.”

Flaring Up

George Wyatt's new boat chugged along about fifty-feet off the shore of Fort Jefferson. As difficult as it was, Troy managed to drag a line from the seaplane out to the newly christened *Wyatt Load* and then crank it in close with a winch attached to the barge.

The fifty-gallon drum of Jet-A fuel Troy had stashed on Wyatt's oil rig had finally come in handy. Initially, they were in a rush to fill the plane's empty tank, but the radio message from shore told them Chris Collins had rescued Chelsea. The bad news was that Vincent Pinzioni had escaped with the artifacts.

Chris assured Troy that he wouldn't get far as the full weight of the C.I.A. machine was after him now. But Troy couldn't help but feel that he'd missed his chance yet again. It was *his* wreck. He'd discovered it. He was entitled to the rights... but it was gone, back to the sea.

After loading the passengers onto the plane, R.B., Megan, Joe, and—unbelievably—the resurrected Natasha, Troy fired the engine up and taxied out into the open water. The gulf was calm today, belying the fact a tropical storm had come through only days before. Gidget lifted out of the water, freeing them all from their prison on the island.

"What's that smell?" asked R.B., bringing Troy out of his funk.

"Joe had a bit of a tough time with the ride out to the fort," he said, laughing, and puffed his cheeks up imitating a dry heave.

"Gross," Megan said, pinching her nose.

"No worries, Joe," —Natasha slapped him on the back— "happens to the best of us."

Joe nodded, his lips pursed.

"Oh..." she said leaning away from him, "you're not gonna—"

She didn't get the sentence out before Joe let go of another spew.

"Really?" R.B. asked.

Troy laughed as the passengers all scrambled to get away from the ill detective.

"You're cleaning that up?" R.B. raised an eyebrow to Troy.

"I got it, I got it," he said.

Ten minutes into their flight, Joe had exhausted his stomach and had fallen into a fitful sleep. Still, no one sat near him... just in case.

"What's that down there?" R.B. asked, pointing. "At your ten o'clock."

Troy craned his neck to see out the window. A boat was drifting in the water, no passengers visible. A thick smoke was drifting from its back end. Under the smoke, Troy could barely make out the words, *Ocean Blue*.

"Well I'll be!" he exclaimed. "That's Vince's boat."

"But where's Vince?" R.B. asked.

"Might be down below working on the engine."

"Good point. Swing in a little closer."

Troy moved the stick and the plane angled into a soft bank down toward the boat. In a split second, Troy saw the man stick his head out of the lower hatch and aim the gun.

"Dangit!" he said, jerking the controls back and lifting the seaplane into a sharp climb.

Three shots pinged against the belly of the plane.

"Shit, get us out of here!" Natasha cried from the back.

"Workin' on it, darlin'," Troy said, fighting the wheel, but the plane refused to climb.

"What's wrong?" R.B. demanded, "why aren't you climbing?"

"I'm pullin' up hard," Troy said straining, "but she ain't respondin'."

"Dammit." R.B. turned to look out at the wing above them.

A loose cable flapped roughly out of the back of the wing, severed from the flap.

"He's cut the flap cable," R.B. said. "We're gonna have to put her down."

"Double dangit!"

The plane shook as he turned her away from Vince's boat and glided it down toward the water. *Second crash landing in a day*, Troy thought. *I'm on fire*.

Gidget splashed down harder than before as the flap made the descent a little rougher than his first landing. Joe Bond woke up on impact and jerked his gun out of his holster. He looked a little less green than before; the sleep had done him good.

"What the hell's going on?" he demanded.

"Just a quick detour," Troy said, taking off his headphones.

They had come down in circles with the wounded flap and more sharply than a normal landing. They ended up about fifty feet away from the *Ocean Blue*.

"Get down everybody," Troy said, and crouched and shuffled into

the back of the plane. "How many bullets you got in that thing, Joe?"

The detective checked the magazine. "Three."

"Aw hell!" Troy peered out the closest window at the nearby boat.

Nothing. No sign of Vince. Smoke still poured out of the back of the boat. He must've been dead in the water.

Suddenly, three more shots pelted into the side of the plane. Glass shattered out of one of the windows and showered the passengers.

Joe jerked upright and aimed the pistol through the now open window. He fired off three shots, temporarily deafening everyone in the cabin.

"Really?" Troy had his hands over his ears. "All three shots? Just like that?"

Joe Bond shrugged and holstered the pistol. "I had a clear shot. I think I got him."

Troy eased himself up and strained to look out at the boat.

Unbelievably, the current was closing the gap between the plane and the boat... and fast.

Vince popped his head up and fired again. More glass shattered and Megan screamed. The silence of an emptied gun filled the cabin of the seaplane.

Vince's voice called over the water. "Ha ha! You out of bullets over there? Well, I got plenty over here and I'm gonna put one in everybody's head over there."

Troy took a quick look. The *Ocean Blue* was only twenty feet away now and still closing fast.

"Crap," Troy mumbled.

"Everybody stay low and crawl toward the back of the plane," Joe urged them, "and don't give him anything to shoot at. If we're lucky the current will change and he won't be able to get a clear shot at us."

"And if it doesn't change?" Natasha asked.

He didn't answer. They all army-crawled their way toward the back of Gidget.

"It's all over now, Troy!" shouted Vince. "You got about three minutes before I sink you all to the bottom of the gulf."

A crackling sound came from the cockpit. *What now?* Troy thought. *Dadgum, the radio!*

He put a finger to his lips and crawled as quickly as he could to the cockpit. He reached up to grab the headphones and a shot pinged through the glass and hit his left shoulder.

"Ow, shit, gosh-dangit!" he yelled and grabbed his shoulder.

"You okay, Troy?" R.B. called.

More shots ricocheted off the plane near the cockpit.

"I'm good," he wheezed, "just scratched me. Didn't go through."

"Come on, T-Boy," called Vince, his voice sounding like he must

only be ten feet away now, “stick that head up again.”

“Gidget, this is the *Wyatt Load*,” came George Wyatt’s voice over the radio. “We’re picking up shots fired. Troy, you okay? What’s going on?”

More shots rang into the cockpit. Troy waited for the firing to stop and jumped up. He grabbed the headphones and dove to the floor. Glass shattered above his head and pelted into the metal sheeting of the seaplane.

He shoved the headphones on, and said, “Wyatt, we’re dead in the water. Pinzioni is out here shootin’ up my plane. Get your ass over here!”

No answer. The radio was dead. One of the bullets must’ve pierced it and put it out of commission.

Dangit, Troy thought, wondering if his message had gotten through.

“Vince!” he called toward the shattered opening. “Don’t shoot. I’ll come up and you can take me. Don’t hurt anybody else.”

Vince’s laughter echoed up to the plane.

Shit! Troy thought he sounded as if he was right there, just a few feet away. If he made it to the plane, they were all dead.

“Yeah, yeah,” Vince said sarcastically, “stick your head up there again. I promise not to hurt anyone.”

Troy knew he was lying, but he decided to make a play of it to see if Vince would let him on the boat.

“Okay,” he yelled out the window, “I’m gonna open the door. Don’t shoot. I’ll come over and you can do whatever you want.”

“Deal,” Vince said shortly.

Troy crawled back toward the crouched passengers.

“You are not doing this!” R.B. hissed at him.

“He’s gonna kill us all,” Troy said, “gotta try something to distract him.”

“Troy, he’s just going to shoot you,” Natasha said, “and then climb on here and shoot all of us.”

“Let’s sit tight,” Joe said, and held his hand out, “wait for the cavalry to come. They’ll realize we’re not there and send out a boat.”

“Yeah right,” Troy said. “That could take hours and we’ll all be full of holes by then.”

Megan shifted and groaned.

Troy looked back at her. She rolled over and rubbed her back.

“Sorry,” she whispered, “something sharp keeps poking me in the back.”

“That’s the survival kit under there...” Troy’s voice drifted off. “... hand it to me and I’ll bandage up this should—”

His mind raced. “Quick,” he said, “give me that kit.”

R.B. arched his eyebrow.

Megan inched around and reached behind her back. She heaved the metal box out from under the seat and shoved it toward Troy. He opened it and pulled out a flare gun. A strange look crept onto R.B.'s face.

"I know what you're thinking, Troy," R.B. said, "but unfortunately, the aim with that thing is atrocious. You'd have to be super close to get him. And even then, it might not do very much damage."

"It's all we got, brother," Troy said. He clicked the barrel back and looked inside the flare gun. "Dangit. One shot." Closing it, he turned to R.B. "I'm goin' out. And when I get over there, I'm gonna need a diversion of some sort."

He tucked the gun into his waistband and took his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat off his head. "Always did want to go out in a blaze of glory," Troy said, smiling, and held out the hat to his brother. "Take care of this thing for me if I don't come back."

"That's not gonna happen, bro," R.B. said, "just aim for his head. If nothing else, you'll blind him."

Troy nodded and moved toward the door. In the distance, he heard a deep rumbling sound. *Has the cavalry actually come through?* He couldn't tell, but they were pretty far off.

"Vince!" he called out the window, "I'm comin' out. Don't shoot!"

"You got it, T-Boy!" Vince answered.

Troy eased up to the door and worked the latch. He opened the door and put his hands out and up.

"Comin' out now."

"I gotcha covered," Vince said.

His boat was three feet away from the pontoons on the plane. Troy hopped over onto the bow of the boat.

"No fast moves," Vince said and sneered at him.

The rumbling sound was louder out here and Troy couldn't help but look toward it. Running faster than he thought possible was the *Wyatt Load*. And it was bearing down on them fast. *Hot damn*, Troy thought, *my message got through to Wyatt*.

Unbelievably, Vince hadn't noticed it until Troy looked in that direction. Must've had some ringing in his ears from all the gunfire. He jerked his head toward the boat and aimed his rifle. He fired repeatedly, bullets punching into the boat's cabin.

Troy lifted his shirt and pulled out the flare gun. He raised it up and aimed directly at Vince's head. He pulled the trigger. Red lightning shot out of the gun and punched Vince in the side of the head. He screamed and swung the rifle around at Troy. He jumped overboard, diving away as Vince fired over and over. He plunged down deep into the water and swam hard away from the boat. He

heard the rifle's muffle shots whizz nearby, and then it was silent.

He was out of bullets. Troy pushed hard to get to the other side of the plane and surfaced. Vince was screaming and still pulling the rifle's trigger, but nothing was happening. His face was a shield of blood and his voice was ragged. The flare had done a number on him.

"I'm gonna frickin' kill you!" he screamed.

And that's when the *Wyatt Load* slammed into the *Ocean Blue*. Traveling at twenty knots, it shattered the smaller boat. Vince was thrown into the water as it nearly split his boat down the middle. The *Wyatt Load* never slowed, plowing through the boat and sending pieces of it flying. As it cleared through the wreckage, the hull began to list and take on water. Within seconds, the bulk of it was gone into the swirling deep.

The *Wyatt Load* eased to a stop. Troy swam around the plane and lifted himself up onto a pontoon. R.B. had climbed down and reached out to him, helping him up from the water. Troy held a hand over his eyes and peered out into the wreckage drifting by. No sign of Vince. He was gone. Back into the gulf with his ancestor's boat.

"You okay?"

"Yup."

"Good." R.B. clapped him on the back.

Troy climbed up to look toward the *Wyatt Load*. It was making a long, slow turn back toward them.

"Think they'll let us hitch a ride?" he asked R.B.

"I'm sure," —he held out the straw cowboy hat— "but you better put this on. They won't recognize you without it."

Troy smiled and put the hat on his head.

He stretched out his hand and put his thumb in the air.

Light My Fire

“Y ou sure about this, bro?” R.B. asked as Troy loaded his

things into the back of a new pickup truck he’d bought off some tourist who’d decided to make a go at living in Key West.

“Yup,” he said, holding out his hand toward his brother, “I ain’t cut out to stay in one place very long.”

R.B. slapped his hand away and wrapped his arms around Troy. He pulled him in and gave him a bear hug. “You headin’ over to Pepe’s?” he asked.

“Yeah, gonna fill up the belly before I head out,” Troy said and got into his truck and fired it up.

R.B. tapped the top of the driver’s side door. “Okay, bro. Tell Megan I said *Hi*.”

“Will do.”

“And you know you can always come back.”

“I know,” Troy said as he pulled away.



“I’LL HAVE THE—”

“I know, I know,” —the waitress rolled her eyes at him— “pork chop covered steak.”

“Put it on my tab,” he said and winked at her.

“Uh huh,” she said, “you ain’t never gonna pay that tab.”

He opened his mouth, but Megan Simons interrupted him. “That’s okay. I’ll take care of it. His whole tab, that is.”

The waitress arched an eyebrow. “His *whole* tab?”

“Yes, the whole tab.”

“Okay, sweetie,” —the waitress walked back toward the kitchen— “but you might want to see the total first.”

Megan laughed. “How long have you been putting stuff on that check?”

“Hmmm,” Troy said, sipping a sweet tea, “maybe eight months.”

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh..."

"Yeah."

"It's okay," she said and smiled, "with my swanky new job at the shipwreck museum down here, I should be able to handle it. I just hope they don't count the gold bars every night."

Troy laughed. "Director, right?"

"That's right," she said, nodding.

"Who's gonna run the Dolphin place?"

"I don't know," she said, shrugging, "probably Chelsea. She'd be a good choice."

"Ahhh, gotcha," he said.

The waitress slid two plates of food in front of them and laid a strip of paper down beside Megan's plate. She picked it up and scrolled down to the bottom.

"Holy crap, Troy!"

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that."

Shaking her head, she turned the paper over and laid it aside. "So, what's gonna happen to R.B. and the Tortuga Adventures business?" she asked him, cutting a piece of steak off and blowing on it.

"Believe it or not, he's gonna work with Joe Bond on getting his flying license," he said. "He's got some kind of military experience, so he should be a good fit."

"He doesn't want to be a cop anymore?"

"I guess not," Troy said, chewing a bit. "They offered him a post out at Fort Jefferson... ya know, to fill the vacancies, but he said he was ready for something new."

"Yeah, I heard they gave that post to Natasha."

"At least for now. Until the C.I.A. needs her for something else."

They ate in silence for a minute.

"Where will you go?" Megan put her fork down.

"Not too sure about that, darlin'," Troy said. "Gonna head up the coast and see what calls out to me."

He was surprised to see her eyes well up with tears.

"I'll miss you."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm sure I'll be back someday though. And besides, you'll have R.B. to keep you company."

She laughed and a tear fell onto her cheek. "That I do."

"Who knows," —he reached up and dried the tear— "if Wyatt's new oil reserve turns out to be as big as he says, maybe I'll work out on his rig. He said I always had a place to land out there."

She nodded and smiled. "As long as I'm here, you can land with me too."

"Thank you, darlin'," he said, pushing back from the table.

He stood up and pushed his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat

back on his head.

“Take care,” he said, and walked to the door.

He got into his truck and clicked on the radio. He wondered if the music was a sign of things to come, as Jim Morrison crooned out the words to Light My Fire.

He turned it up.

Epilogue

1492

Chris Collins carried the silver case into his office and shut the door behind him. He placed it carefully on his desk and undid the clasps. It hissed open as some sort of preservative gas wafted out of it.

He slipped on a pair of latex gloves and lifted the object out of the case. He turned it over and clicked on a small pen-light to examine the inside.

He could barely make out the words *La Gallega* and underneath that, *Juan de la Cosa*. It was his ancestor's bell. The famed bell from the Santa Maria. The holes in it had a story to tell. He wasn't sure what that story was, but someday it would come to light. The Pinzon's treachery would be discovered and the name of Christopher Columbus would be honored once again.

He gently placed the bell back in the case. Stripping the gloves from his hands, he reached for his phone and buzzed the intercom.

"Teresa," he said, "I have an item for storage."

"Yes, sir," she said.

The case was loaded onto a cart and wheeled into the underground lab with the other one thousand, four-hundred and ninety-two artifacts, where it would wait for examination—buried again.

THE END

Blood Wave

An excerpt from A Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #3

Prologue

There's A Light

Being careful not to get any of the girl's blood on him, Adrian

Hull—known as Taz to his friends—broke the bones in her arms, crushed between his foot and the floor. She was petite, so they didn't offer much resistance. Once he was through with that, he proceeded to break her femurs. Those took a bit more doing, but he was strong and they eventually gave way. After this gruesome work was done, she fit perfectly into the chest that had once held the oil for the light at the top of the Cape Florida Lighthouse on Key Biscayne.

It was the perfect place to hide a body, as it had been sitting empty and unused since the Miami Centennial celebration in July 1996. And, of course, it no longer ran on oil, so there was very little chance anyone would open the decorative chest anyway.

As he made his way down the spiral staircase, he noticed he'd smudged a little bit of her blood on his pristine white shoe.

"Dammit all," he muttered, wiping the stained heel with his hand, but the blood refused to budge. Wearing all white was the standard at The Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden, so he'd have to get the stain out, or get some new ones before he started his shift.

Linda *Big Boobs* Morgenstern was his first lesson of the day. He glanced down at his watch: 7:21 am. Plenty of time. She always booked him at eight and showed up at 8:15, sometimes 8:30.

He creaked open the door at the base of the lighthouse and peeked out. The beach at the south end of the island was deserted. He stepped out onto the sand, removed his shoes, and flung them as far as he could out into the surf.

Immediately after doing so, he realized it was a big mistake. The tide would surely bring them right back in to shore. He waded out in the rising tide, scrounging around for the sneakers. He found one of them, the clean one.

"Shit," he mumbled, and threw the shoe as far as he could back into the water.

Maybe they'd disappear or maybe even get eaten by a shark. And

maybe the salt water would dissolve the blood anyway. Too many maybes.

He took off his socks and started jogging back down the beach. A few early morning runners were out, but not many tourists. Most of them were looking down at Fitbits or lost in their earbuds, so they never even noticed him—he was invisible. And that invisibility was what had gotten him into this mess in the first place.

Caroline had been so cute. She'd taken tennis lessons from him since her senior year of high school, and he'd been certain she was interested in him. They had shared so much time together and she had worn more and more revealing outfits for their lessons—which, of course, meant she wanted him to look at her lithe body. Remembering the sheen of sweat on her after an intense workout sent a thrill through him, and he mildly regretted he'd had to kill her. But only mildly.

The trouble had all started last night. They'd been on the courts after nine... alone. Even Betty the desk clerk had gone home, and he'd promised he'd lock up. They played for over two hours... off the clock. Wasn't that worth something to her? He replayed the scene in his mind, over and over, wishing he could take it all back.

The heat flush on her cheeks and her million-dollar smile had made her irresistible. Taz had read the situation wrong and leaned in and kissed her. She immediately slapped him on the cheek, and hard.

"What the hell?" she demanded, pushing back from him.

"But, I thought—" he started.

"Well you thought wrong, asshole."

The sudden vehemence of her reaction startled him. They'd been together for so long now.

"I have a boyfriend," she yelled as she stood up and started shoving her gear into her bag, "and you're just a piece of shit tennis pro."

Taz could feel the anger rising in him. It was always this way at The Ritz. He was *the help*, a lower class of person.

"I mean, really, Taz?" she said as she started walking away.

He fought the sudden burning hate inside him and tried desperately to rescue the situation. "Wait, Caroline. Ah was jus' playin' 'round. Let's jus' forget the whole thing."

She turned back toward him and thrust a finger into his chest. "Forget the whole thing? Are you frickin' kidding me?"

Tears formed in her eyes, apparently from the sudden rage.

"No, I won't be forgetting the whole thing," she said, and jabbed him with each word. "First, I'm going to get you fired. Then, I'm going to tell my boyfriend—who by the way is a wrestler at the University of Miami. And last..."

Adrian Taz Hull felt his world crashing down on him. He'd worked so hard to get out of Tasmania, and had found this amazing job at The Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden. They'd gone to a lot of trouble to get his visa taken care of, to get him this position, and even rented a place for him to live in another employee's name (slightly shady, but, eh, he didn't care). He'd likely be denied any further stay in the United States; there would be no green card, and he'd likely be deported ASAP. That's when she let the hammer fall.

"And last, I'm going to tell my father," —she put her hands on her hips— "and when his lawyers are through with you, you'll wish you were dead."

His vision misted red and the next few seconds happened in super slow motion. Without thinking, he unleashed a backhand with his tennis racket. Unfortunately, his one-handed backhand had often been compared to the legends of the game—Rod Laver, Pete Sampras and Roger Federer—as being one of the hardest hit strokes... ever.

Her head snapped sideways and teeth went flying in a spray of blood.

"Fookin' bitch," he muttered as she slumped to the ground.

As he realized what had happened, he dropped his racket and fell to his knees beside her.

"Aw, shit, Caroline," he said, and put his hands under her neck.

He could feel loose bones working around under her skin. She was stone-cold dead. No passing go, no collecting two-hundred dollars, straight to jail dead.

His mind raced. *Call the cops?* No, that was a short route to extradition to jail in Tasmania. Betty was the only person at the club who'd known he was here with her, but that wasn't unusual. Caroline usually walked down to her lessons from the Grand Bay Resort & Residences where her father owned the entire top floor penthouse, but for some reason, she'd driven tonight. Her brand-new, fire engine red 718 Boxster S Porsche was sitting out front.

He dragged her body into the bathroom and shoved her into a stall. He'd have plenty of time to get the car up to South Beach. So many beautiful girls disappeared up there, she'd be just one more of a thousand cases. The connection with him would end when they found her car.

He screamed through traffic, admiring the three-hundred horsepower beast of a car, and parked it in a public lot near Club Opium. He didn't bother to pay the attendant; he just jumped out of the car and jogged to the nearest bus stop. An hour and a half later he was back on Key Biscayne hauling her body down the beach. It had taken him longer than he planned, most of the night actually. But as dawn broke, he felt he'd done all he could to distance himself from

the unfortunate incident.

He unlocked the clubhouse door and let himself in. Betty hadn't gotten in yet, so he had time to grab a new pair of shoes from the stock room, jump in the shower, and change into a new set of tennis whites. He dumped the old ones into the laundry and walked out into the lobby.

Betty was here now and scribbling some notes on the court reservation sheets.

"Good morning, Taz," she said, smiling. "Linda's here. Can you believe it? Early for once."

"Crikey, that's a first," he said, raising his eyebrows.

"How'd it go last night with Caroline?"

"Aah, ya know," he said, sounding as casual as possible, "same as always. Workin' on that ridiculous two-handed backhand."

She laughed. "Good, good. I have a message here that her sister wants to get a lesson in tonight. You're a popular man!"

Sister. Caroline had a twin sister—Mindy. She was never as good at tennis as Caroline had been, but she was just as cute. Maybe cuter.

Taz felt his mood lift. He was back in the game.

"Ah reckon that's alright," he said and winked at Betty. "Get her in at seven, then."

"You got it, Taz," she said as he grabbed his racket from his desk.

With horror, he spotted blood all over the top of it. He quickly grabbed a guest towel from the counter and wiped it clean before the kindly desk clerk looked up.

"Linda's out on court five," she said and waved toward the door, "and don't get caught staring at her chest again, young man." She was smirking and shaking her head.

"Me? Ha! Ah nevah get caught," —he winked at her and lowered sunglasses over his eyes— "got me shades!"

Walking out to the court, he caught a glimpse of Linda. She was wearing an insanely small and tight sports bra stretched to its limit over massive fake boobs. And thank the gods... it was white. Her shorts were skin-tight over what the Miami boys called a glorious booty. She was jumping up and down, swinging her arms back and forth in a ridiculous routine to prepare for her lesson. Taz felt his excitement growing. Today was going to be a great day after all.

He headed out into the sunshine feeling like a new man.

Troy Clint Bodean tilted his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy

hat back on his head, took his Costa Del Mar Pescador sunglasses off his blue eyes, and wiped the sweat from his forehead and face with his red bandana. The sun was scorching and the pristine white sand burned his feet and the seat of his trunks. He could feel the salt from the ocean and the sweat drying on his skin. The air was briny and thick, reminding him of the hottest days back in Louisiana. Offshore, in the distance, a black cloud skirted the horizon. Sometimes the afternoon storms would come in and sometimes they wouldn't. The tinny sound of his old-school antenna radio bleated out the local Danger Dave Radio show. Ol' Dave was in rare form today, playing plenty of Stones, Beatles and Zeppelin. Troy turned it up and slipped his sunglasses back over his eyes.

Children were laughing and screaming and running and swimming in every direction. The cacophony didn't bother him though. As long as the ocean waves kept crashing, he was doin' fine. A girl of about twelve was floundering in a two-person sailboat and Troy knew the call would come soon enough... but he decided to wait it out.

"Hey, Tony-boy!" called a man's whiny voice from the garish tiki hut up by the pool.

Troy didn't look back at the man. "It's Troy, Don. Troy."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Don said. "You gonna get out theyah and help that girl bring our boat back?"

Don Henderson, the manager of The Ritz-Carlton's beach services, was not Australian, but for some reason he affected an Australian accent. He had thinning red hair, transparently white skin, and at least one-hundred freckles per square inch on his face. He was definitely not the type of person who should spend more than ten minutes on the beach for fear of dramatic sunburn. Troy hated him... but he was the boss.

"Yup." Troy stood slowly, working out the cricks in his back. "I'll get 'er in."

He half-waded, half-swam out to where the girl was drifting around, and grabbed the rope on the front of the boat. It took him the better part of fifteen minutes and a pretty good gash on his right hand to tow her back to the shore. Her mother, who hadn't realized the girl was in any distress, tucked a dollar bill into Troy's hand and thanked him for his trouble.

"No trouble at all, ma'am," he said, and tipped his hat and shoved the money into his pocket.

He'd collected a whopping total of eight dollars today. It wasn't much, but it would pay for at least two nights of bar tabs at the Sonesta if Gino was working, maybe three.

The black cloud offshore had rolled in closer, and suddenly a crack of lightning danced down to the water. A loud boom of thunder followed seconds later. Looked like this one was rolling in.

"Get 'em in, Troy!" called Don, "I'm outta heyah."

Troy nodded and grabbed an air horn from the nearest sailboat. He raised it into the air and blasted it three times—the universal signal for all of the Ritz-Carlton's boats, surf boards, canoes, jet skis, and paddle boards to come back to shore. It would be up to him to get all the riders safely back to the beach. Don wouldn't be helping, that was for sure.

People were starting to shake the sand from their towels and stuff belongings into expensive designer beach bags as the wind began to blow. Huge drops of rain suddenly pelted down on the sand, nearly causing it to sizzle.

Troy dragged boat after boat and board after board up onto the sand and chained them together to secure them for the night. The drops turned to sheets of rain and Troy let it wash the salt from his skin. When he dragged the last board up the beach, he found a white shoe tangled up in the tow-line. It looked fairly new, so he shrugged and tossed it into the plastic bin by the door that held his belongings during his shift—someone might claim it.

Tugging on his old Tortuga Adventures t-shirt, he locked the tiki hut door and started down the beach toward the Sonesta. Gino would be working tonight and he had eight dollars in his pocket. Life was good.



THE SONESTA RESORT ON KEY BISCAIYNE was one of the last holdovers from the seventies construction boom on the island. It had tiered landings on the ends that staggered all the way to the top floor, making it look as if a cruise ship had been parked on the beach. Its tenure on the island was going to be cut short by new construction,

starting whenever the funding was approved. Troy hated that thought. It was a groovy place tucked in with all the pastel Miami crap that had gone up recently. The best part was the pool bar. It was tiny. Eight people could sit around the bar on shiny chrome stools with red leather cushioned tops—if they were okay with their elbows touching. The bar itself was just a crappy white laminate counter on a base wrapped with straw. Someone had decided it would be a tiki bar at some point, and the effect was less than tropical. And unless you knew the bartender, the drinks were more expensive than the ones sloshed out on South Beach. Good for Troy, he knew the bartender.

Troy could hear Gino's music blaring out on the sand as he got closer to the Sonesta's beachside entrance. *Lola*, by the Kinks. He played it at least five times a night and paraded around the bar thumping his chest and belting out the quasi-transgender lyrics with gusto as his tourist guests laughed, sang along, and stuffed money in his tip jar. He emptied his jar more than five times a night.

Taking the steps up to the pool deck three at a time, Troy ducked under the cover of the bar's tin roof. He took off his hat and shook the rain out of his hair.

"Troy, my friend!" Gino shouted over the tops of the tourists crowded around his bar, "you made it."

"Yup," —Troy tilted his bearded chin back at the bartender— "was a good day on the beach, until the squall hit."

"Squall?" Gino laughed. "That was hardly a whimper!"

A particularly amorous couple got up from the bar. The man was salt and pepper gray and the girl was South Beach plastic blonde. Troy figured he knew exactly what was going on there and tipped his head to them as they walked past him toward the Oceana. *That room is probably rented by the hour*, he thought.

Gino rushed over and mopped the bar in front of Troy. He was wearing his trademark navy blue Hawaiian shirt with giant orange flowers all over it tucked into ridiculously tight white shorts. His mustache was another holdover from the seventies and his hair was a mop of loose, wavy auburn curls. Some of the older ladies who frequented his bar thought he was a dead ringer for Tom Selleck.

"The usual, my friend?" Gino grinned, holding up a bottle of one-hundred fifty-one proof rum.

"You know me too well," Troy said and smiled, "but I'll just go with a Corona tonight."

"Absolutely." Gino slid the bottle of rum back onto its shelf.

"Let's make that two," a girl said from behind Troy.

He turned toward her and arched his eyebrow. The voice belonged to a cute young girl who couldn't possibly have been older than twenty... ish. Her hair was streaked with blonde, but it looked

natural, like the sun had bleached it. Her skin matched that too; brown and smooth. Her nose was freckled, but not obnoxiously so, and her eyes were green... forest green. Deep and dark, but clear and iridescent—*did I just think the word iridescent*, Troy thought? She wore a tight white tank top and dark denim shorts. Both were clearly expensive designer pieces, designed to look worn in just the right way.

"Darlin'," Troy started, "I'm happy to buy you a beer, but does your mama know you're out and about cavortin' with strangers?"

She laughed and winked at Gino. He exchanged a friendly smile with her and popped the top off two Coronas and shoved a lime into each.

"This one is on me," Gino said, and walked away to tend to other patrons.

She squeezed the lime into the beer and slid onto the barstool next to Troy.

"Strangers, eh?" she asked. "Guess you haven't been around the Oceana much. And my mother has been gone for years."

"Dangit, sorry about your mom." Troy winced.

"Oh, she's not dead. Don't be sorry." The girl shook her head. "But she was a conniving bitch that ran off with my dad's lawyer."

"I see. Well, I've only been here a coupla months," Troy said, squinting. "What's that gotta do with anything?"

"My dad owns the top floor." She pointed toward the penthouse.

Aw, *hell*, thought Troy. He remembered a long-forgotten line from a David Lee Roth song about messin' with the mayor's daughter, or something along those lines.

"Mindy?" he asked. "As in, Mindy—my father created Mortgage-Finder.com—Colpiller?"

"Yours truly," she said and smiled.

"Pleasure to meet you." Troy held up a finger toward Gino. "Check, please?"

"Oh, come on now," she said, tugging his arm down, "you can't just buy me a beer and then bug out 'cause you know who my dad is."

"Number one, I didn't buy you a beer. Gino did." He eased up off the stool. "And number two, yes, I can."

She sighed heavily. "Just like all the rest. I'm never going to meet any guys who aren't afraid of my father."

Gino swooped in and sat two fresh Coronas on the bar, even though they had barely taken a sip of the first couple he'd served them. He whirled away before Troy could protest.

"I bought you that one," she said, "so you might as well stay long enough to drink it. I'll leave you alone."

"Well, I didn't mean..." Troy started.

She stood up, clinked her beer against his with a sad look in her

eyes, and walked around to the other side of the bar.

Dangit, Troy thought.

He took a sip of beer and noticed Gino looking at him, shaking his head.

“What?” he said with a shrug.

The bartender leaned in to speak softly. “She has no friends, amigo. She’s sheltered and protected in a way you and I will never understand.”

“Yeah, but I don’t need no friends,” Troy protested.

“You may not,” —Gino wiped the already-clean bar— “but she does. She’s harmless. Just wants company.”

“Dangit,” Troy muttered and jerked his thumb toward the blender behind the bar, “gimme two of those one fifty-one piña coladas.”

“Aha!” Gino slapped his chest. “That’s the spirit!”

He clicked a button on his radio and *Lola* blared out again. The blender whizzed as the crowd woke up and started singing along. Gino slid the drinks to Troy.

I’m gon’ regret this, Troy thought. He held up the two drinks toward Mindy and inclined his head back as if to say, *come on over*. She laughed and nodded.

She sat down and held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Mindy.”

“Troy,” he said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“You too.” She pulled out her phone and clicked out a text.

Then she looked in his eyes. “I promise, no cavorting.”

“Ha!” he blurted out, “deal.”

He took a sip of his drink. It was exquisite. Gino made the best piña coladas in the world as far as Troy was concerned. Fresh coconut cream, pineapple juice straight from the fruit, and one-fifty-one rum for a straight up kick in the pants. *Dang good*.

“Damn, that’s good!” Mindy said.

“Yup,” Troy agreed, “never had better.”

She took another sip and her phone chirped. Looking at the screen she pursed her lips.

“Leave me alone, Taz,” she muttered.

“Taz?”

“My sister’s tennis pro,” she said, “he’s a little weird and totally obsessed with her.”

“Yikes,” Troy said.

“Yeah, I was supposed to have a lesson with him tonight, but then the rain came.” She glanced at her phone. “Now he won’t stop texting me.”

Troy raised his eyebrows as Gino leaned in to check their drinks.

“How is Caroline, by the way?” the bartender asked.

“Caroline?” Troy asked.

“Actually, I haven’t heard from her all day,” she said to Gino.

“My twin sister,” she said and turned to Troy.

“Twin... sisters...?” Troy stumbled over his words.

“Yeah,” she winked at him, “there’s two of me.”

“Check, please,” he joked to Gino.

Mindy laughed and Troy thought it was incredibly infectious.

“Just remember,” she said with a wink, “no cavorting.”

Regrettin’ this already.

Ain't Missin' You

P rivate investigator, Remington Hoyt Reginald, dabbed his upper

lip with a pristine white, monogrammed handkerchief. The lingering taste of his morning mint julep kept his tongue a bit dry and thirsty. His purple ascot was tucked to perfection into his highly-starched, blush-pink Hilditch And Key dress shirt. The cufflinks were in the shape of handcuffs—one cuff on his right sleeve, one cuff on his left—just above the monogram. Salvatore Ferragamo cap toe oxford shoes finished his outfit in splendid burgundy. He looked amazing, if he did say so himself.

All this was likely wasted on his client, Jack Colpiller, who was wearing a white V-neck t-shirt—it looked to be Fruit of the Loom brand—and a pair of light blue swim trunks—at least those were Ralph Lauren. His flip-flops proudly bore no visible logo. Probably bought from one of the ridiculous tourist shops down by South Beach, *Balls* or *Wings* or *Eagles*. *Ugh*, thought Remington, *no accounting for taste*.

“Her mother probably has her brainwashed against me,” Jack said as Remington scribbled in a small moleskin notebook. “After her part of the will too, I’m sure.”

“Mmhmm,” said Remington, who didn’t look up.

“Hell, I just want to know where she is,” he said and threw up his hands. “Damn women.”

“Not to worry, sir.” Remington closed his notebook and slid it into his briefcase. “I’ll let you know before tonight.”

Jack Colpiller stood up and flip-flopped his way over to the massive black grand piano that stood next to the nine-foot high solid glass wall looking out over the beach. He grabbed an envelope from the top of the piano and opened it. He flipped through it and handed it to Remington.

“Your downpayment,” he said to the private investigator, “count it if you like. The rest when she’s back home.”

Remington slid the envelope into his case without opening it. He

hid his disdain for the implication that he would count the money in front of a client—even a client with the status of Colpiller—even if it was seventy-five grand.

If the money was short, he would be issued an invoice for the remainder. He already had an idea that the daughter had, in fact, run off with a boy, or maybe she had run off to her mother. He knew this because he'd located her car near the club district on South Beach. Typical rich bitch-leaving-daddy scenario. All he had to do was get her tag run at Miami P.D., verify her whereabouts, take a few high-resolution photos of her, and the rest of the two-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars would be *briefcased* over to him. All of this was chump change compared to what his other case could lead to, but he hadn't discovered that yet. He had no idea what he was about to get into.

Pushing the elevator button to descend, he put on his most confident smile.

"I'll most likely find her by ten o'clock tonight," he said as the doors slid open and he stepped in.

Jack just nodded and raised his glass. *It looks like whiskey*, thought Remington, *who drinks whiskey this time of the morning... actually, who drinks whiskey at all... ugh?*



TROY BODEAN WOKE up alone in his bed. The sheets were tossed off him and the fan was sitting right next to him, blowing as hard as it could... and he was still sweating. The apartment was provided by Don Henderson's beach services company as part of Troy's employment. It was intended to be shared by two of the company's workers, but when Eduardo got deported, the apartment became Troy's alone. He'd given up a chunk of his pay to keep it that way. Small as it was, with only three rooms—bedroom, bathroom, and combo kitchen, dining, living room—it wasn't half bad. He had a futon in the living room, a twin mattress on the floor of the bedroom, and a plastic chair and TV tray in the dining area of the kitchen. No television, just his phone. But it was good enough for catching up on the Dolphins, and occasionally, the Braves.

The heat was stifling, even at six in the morning. With no air-conditioning and the slatted, jalousie style windows, there was very little air-flow and the ceiling fan had died a few days ago. Thankfully, his next-door neighbor had loaned him a box fan and it did a terrific job of pushing the hot air around the apartment. The good news was it was Monday and he was off work. He thought he might even take a dip in the pool.

The miserable little three-story apartment building he lived in was shaped like a horseshoe. In the center of the horseshoe was a small, oval shaped pool. Because of the shape of the building, it was eternally in the shade—which was nice when it was so dang hot. Troy grabbed his beach towel (a five-finger souvenir he quietly lifted from the Ritz) and walked out his door. The inside of the horseshoe was the walkway connecting all the apartments and various stairwells leading down to the ground floor. Troy's place was right in the center. He looked down the three stories to the pool and saw it was empty except for Auggie.

Auggie was his octogenarian Jewish neighbor. He had retired from a home shopping network ten years ago and used his entire life savings to buy one of the ratty top floor apartments. Naturally, he worked as a Walmart greeter to supplement his Social Security.

Troy padded down the metal stairs and walked toward the pool. He dipped his toe in the water. It was frigid. Auggie was leaning against the shallow end of the pool, arms spread akimbo as if he was basking in a hot top. His body was covered with masses of salt and pepper hair, so much that he looked like he was resting in a sea of aging kelp. Troy shivered internally but smiled on the outside.

"How's it going, Auggie?" he asked the old man.

Auggie didn't open his eyes. He just raised one hand in a hello gesture, and said, "It doesn't go, ya gotta push it."

"That right?" Troy dipped a second toe in the water... it was still freezing.

He was pulling off his shirt to take the plunge, hoping that he would get used to the chilly pool, when his cell phone beeped.

"Dat's gotta be you," Auggie said, "I ain't had one in twenty years."

Troy laughed as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

-Beach in 10?

The number wasn't a contact in his phone. Troy was puzzled by it, but couldn't resist.

-Who is this?

-Oh, c'mon now. You haven't forgotten me already have you?

Troy arched an eyebrow. Before he could type a response, the next message pinged.

-It's Mindy, silly. C'mon down. It's better than your crappy pool I'm sure! LOL

Coupla things, Troy thought, *how'd you get my number? And how the hell did you know about my pool?*

As if she'd read his mind, her next text spelled it out.

-You're probably wondering how I got your number. Gino gave it to me. And you told me about your place. Probably trying to get me to come home with you. LOL

Oh, dangit. Troy mentally face-palmed himself. *That's not good.*

-I'm kidding, Gino told me where you lived. No biggie, just get ur ass down here. No cavorting, I promise. The beach is awesome today.

He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not, but he took a look at Auggie drowning in his own body hair and tapped out his reply.

-On my way.

-Good. I need you to put sunscreen on my back.

"Oh hell," Troy mumbled out loud, "no cavortin' indeed.

He pulled himself out of the pool and nodded to Auggie.

"Check you later, Aug," he said.

"Ah, good," the old man smiled. "I could use a check!"

He slipped on his flip flops and headed out the rusty gate.

Senator Gil Dickerson of Florida could feel his smile turning into

a leering ogle as his young intern untied the strings on her bikini top. She handed him a bottle of cocoa-butter, some European crap sunscreen promising the darkest tan money can buy.

“Do my back?” she said, smiling coyly over her bare shoulder.

Gil pointed the bottle at her back and squeezed. It spurted out all over her already dark skin and she giggled at the dirty innuendo.

“Naughty boy,” she said as he rubbed it in.

He applied enough pressure to let her know he got the message she was sending, and that he was more than willing. Sure, he was older by three decades, but when you were famous, none of that mattered. And Gil was in great shape for his age. Standing at almost six-feet two-inches, he was tall enough to appear confident, but not so tall that he appeared overbearing... perfect for a politician. And his salt and pepper hair and beard combined with a slightly olive complexion were enough to garner him a Sean Connery lookalike comparison. And he played it up for all it was worth, even affecting a slightly Scottish brogue.

While attending Harvard Law, he found the actual study and eventual practice of law to be tedious and boring. But he did it well enough to make the Harvard Law Review. At one of the swanky banquets the review was known to host, he shook hands with several influential people. Some of them took notice of his physical, social, and commanding spoken presence in the room. When he spoke, more people listened than didn't. And thus, the grooming began.

It began innocently enough, with speeches at small functions—tests for his crowd appeal—and grew into introductions for higher officials at political rallies. He was ushered along the political path of backroom deals and slightly shady support functions until they were sure they had their boy. And he loved it. Along with the under-the-table support came money, women, and power. Power quickly became his most desired benefit. The women came and went, all in search of a

golden ticket, until Sandra. A staffer in his first campaign, she spent hours working on getting him elected, and though it was only for a small-town Representative's seat, it showed her ability to make Gil into the perfect candidate. At several of his meetings with backers, it became clear that he was going to marry Sandra, whether he wanted to or not. She was going to be part of the package. Every politician needs a First Lady.

Gil didn't mind; he and Sandra had enough in common that they enjoyed each other's company. They had sex, but it was forced and dull. He was careful to conceal the fact that he was uninterested... so as not to hurt her feelings. Some of his colleagues began to suggest that he find enjoyment elsewhere and laughed when he asked what they meant by that.

"Staffers, man," said James Hardy, Senator from Vermont, "why the hell you think they're all sweet young college girls?"

The others in the room slapped each other on the back and plenty of winks and nudges went around the group. It wasn't long before Gil was personally selecting his interns... just for such purposes. He got good at spotting the girls who knew what they were there for, and had them in bed after a few trinkets and gifts. He felt confident that Sandra never knew about any of it, and even if she did, she knew enough to keep her mouth shut.

On the night they celebrated the start of his campaign for Governor of Florida, he was presented with a piece of paper rolled up like a scroll with a red ribbon tied around it.

"What's this?" he asked, feeling the corners of his mouth turning up into a grin.

"We got ya a little something special," said Harry Turnbull, Senator of Maine, and winked at him and smacked his back a few times. "Enjoy, Senator Dickerson. And I'll be appreciating your vote item numba one-fifty-three."

Gil laughed as he untied the ribbon. "You had me at *something special*."

The paper curled open and he could see it was a resume. He held it up and shrugged his shoulders.

"What the hell am I sh'posed to do with thish?" he said in his best Connery accent.

James Hardy grabbed his elbow and squeezed it, bobbing his eyebrows up and down. "Whatevah the hell you wanna do, Senator."

The others in the room all broke into raucous laughter. The intern whose resume he held was hired the next Monday, and their sexual interludes started on Tuesday. Sometimes they'd jump into a closet, sometimes an elevator, and often, his car in the parking garage. He was actually surprised that they'd never gotten caught. It wasn't until

they'd been romping for six months that she started to ask him to take her away on weekend trips. And that's how they ended up sitting on the Senator's boat at Canal Point on Lake Okeechobee at another Senator's private lake house with barely any clothes on.

There weren't enough people here to worry about being recognized. It was just an old man out with his daughter on a lake trip... or so Gil tried to portray. But if anyone had seen him smearing sunscreen all over her bare back, they would've thought it was an odd relationship at best, incest at worst. When he was through, she turned around, her top falling away completely.

"Oops!" she said, feigning embarrassment and barely covering her breasts.

He squirted more sunscreen into his palm. "Young lady, you're gonna get an awful sunburn if I don't put some of this on your chest as well."

She grinned and played along, dropping her arms. She was exquisite. Perfect fake boobs and a flat stomach covered with a very slight sheen of sweat. He knew what was going to happen next. As he lurched toward her with his creamy hands, she said the first terrible thing he'd ever heard from her.

"So," she started casually, "when you gonna be honest with yourself and get rid of that old hag you been bangin' for the last twenty years?"

The comment struck him as rude and crass, and he backhanded her hard... too hard. Say what you would about him, but Sandra was as pure a soul as there ever was... no one was allowed to speak ill of her when he was listening. The intern screamed and turned back toward him. Her jaw was clearly broken and slightly caved in. Blood gushed from her mouth and she spit out two teeth.

"You bagghstarddd!" she gurgled, as if her mouth was full of marbles.

Gil was shocked. He hadn't meant to hit her so hard.

"Oh my God, Sandy, I mean, um..." he couldn't remember her name.

"Ith Jackie, you pieth of thit!" She reached across the boat to grab her phone out of a nearby towel. "I'm goirng to end you!"

She started punching in a number that only had three digits; nine-one-one. Gil sat paralyzed. How would this play out? Would it make the papers? Would Sandra leave him? Shit, his campaign was just getting started. The scandal would be the end of it and the end of his political career.

He leapt toward her and punched her in the face. Her phone jumped out of her hand and plopped into the lake as the scream burbled out of her mouth. The shock was replaced with terror as she

suddenly realized she was in mortal danger.

Gil grabbed her towel and forced it into her face. He dragged her down into the floor of the boat and held it there until she stopped breathing. He let go of the towel and scrambled back to the back of the boat. He drove out to what felt like the center of the lake, wrapped the boat's anchor around her ankles, and tossed her along with her belongings into the water. Panting for air, he raced away from the scene. He parked the boat, got into his car, and sped away without looking back. He made his own call to someone he felt he could trust to help him deal with the situation, Senator James Hardy—the owner of the boat.

He felt tears forming in his eyes as he breathlessly told the story.

“Shut up!” Hardy said as he got to the gory details. “Just shut up and get your ass home. We don’t need to discuss this over a cell connection. Get home, sleep with your wife, and call me in the morning.”

He ended the call and drove as fast as he could manage back to his condo in Brickell. He explained to his wife that the filibuster he’d claimed was keeping him away that weekend had ended earlier than expected. She kissed him on the cheek and had the chef make him dinner... the perfect First Lady.



PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR, Remington Hoyt Reginald, sat in his car with his ridiculously long telephoto lens in shock at what he’d witnessed. Senator Gil Dickerson had been having an affair with Jackie Ranchero-Doral, that was common knowledge around D.C. What wasn’t known to anyone around the senator was that Jackie flew home every weekend to her husband. Said husband had become suspicious of Jackie’s more and more frequent weekends spent with the good senator, and had hired Remington to find out what was really going down.

It had been a typical *shoot some eight-by-ten glossy photos of the adulterous couple having a tryst, show the shocked spouse the damning evidence, collect the payment, shake hands and walk away* kind of case... until Remington had watched Dickerson take the girl out on the boat, stay gone for an hour, then come back without her in a rush that said, *I’m guilty as hell*. But guilty of what? Had he dropped the girl off at another dock? Had she run away? Had he... murdered her and dropped her body in the water? Remington got out of his car and strolled casually over to the boat. He glanced around the marina like a tourist on holiday. God knows he looked like one, dressed in a cheesy beach shop t-shirt that said *Lake Okeechobee Reel Legends* with a

picture of a large mouth bass on it, garish drug-store bought flip flops, and a pair of khaki shorts with cargo pockets... ugh, cargo pockets, for Christ's sake. Who wore this crap? He promised himself he'd change into his Ralph Lauren outfit of desert-red, seersucker light spring cashmere sweater with horizontal navy stripes, and Bardene burlap slip-on sneakers, as soon as he hit the first gas station.

He peered over the edge of the boat and didn't need to look hard to see the blood all over the seats in the back. With a closer look, he spotted what he thought might be... a couple of broken teeth. *Jesus, Gil*, he thought, *what have you done?* Checking to be sure no one was watching him, he stepped down into the boat, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and scooped up the two teeth. He also soaked the corner of the cloth in congealed blood in case he'd need a D.N.A. sample later.

Slumping back into his rental car, he took a Ziploc bag from his duffle and slid the handkerchief and teeth into it. Slowly, his shock at what had seemingly happened started to form into a plan. As he drove south on I-27, he began to realize just how much power he'd just been given over the senator, likely soon-to-be governor, of the state of Florida. He used the drive to organize his thoughts and how he would present the proposition to Gil Dickerson. He made a mental note to Google the cabinet positions a governor would need to fill once he took office. His gram would be so proud. Tears formed in his eyes as he thought of her.

So proud, indeed.

END OF EXCERPT

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Afterword

*I've missed Troy since writing **Hat Check** (now titled **Rogue Wave**), the first novel in the **Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller** series. So, I was happy to get back to his world and his zany escapades in **Deep Wave**.*

*This idea has literally been rolling around in my head for over a decade and began with a different protagonist and never got finished to my satisfaction. After **Rogue Wave**, I realized it was the perfect setting for a new **Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller**, so the rewrite began and it has been so much fun. I have taken **EXTENSIVE** liberties with the story of Christopher Columbus and though there are some factual details included, **MOST** of what is mentioned in this book should be taken as a fictional account of the real story.*

*I must thank and give credit to John Steakley for his immeasurable input into this story and for his idea to call the genre **Tropical Noir** — which I have since changed to **Tropical Thriller**. Our early sojourns to Key West can be felt in the pages of this book.*

*I hope you like the adventure of **Deep Wave** as much as I do. It might be my favorite book in the series (thus far.) If you loved it, please be sure to drop by Amazon and leave a quick review to help others discover the books.*

*Also, if you haven't read it, be sure to pick up **Rogue Wave – A Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #1** (the first in the series.)*

Please be sure to visit <http://davidfberens.com/readergroup> and join my Reader Group so you'll be among the first to know about my promotions, events and specials!

Thank you, Kind Reader,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to David F. Berens. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, prominent 'D' at the beginning and a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Also by David Berens

Tidal Wave - Available as a FREE download for joining my reader group. [CLICK HERE](#) to grab a book full of cool short stories and a Troy Bodean prequel.

Troy Bodean Tropical Thrillers

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- [#3 Blood Wave](#)
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- [#5 Skull Wave](#)
- [#6 Shark Wave](#)

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Deep Wave

A Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #2
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